

02 Special Report
Repair it with Empathy

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**My wife just accused me of
lacking empathy.**

**... I just don't understand how
she can feel that way.**

As we learned earlier, all couples have many disruptions, big and small, in their relationship throughout the course of their interactions. These disruptions often occur as conflicts, emotional distancing from each other, or development of negative feelings. Sometimes things get messy. Often lack of empathy contributes to these disruptions.

But empathy can also be a crucial and powerful skill in fixing your relationship disruption.

In short, in a high percentage of cases you can be a better relationship partner by learning to repair disruptions by upping your empathy skills.

What is empathy exactly?

Empathy has many components, but basically it is the skill of being able to see things from your partner's point of view- even if you don't agree with that point of view. It also involves feeling what your partner feels so you can resonate with each other....to be on the same plane.

It is more than sympathy wherein you feel for your partner. If you are empathetic, you feel with your partner. And if they are empathetic you feel "felt" (or understood) by them.

Finally, people with empathy have an appreciation of how they are coming across to their partner and other family members when they do whatever they do. In other words, empathic partners are self-aware and sensitive to the impact they are having on their partners.

How does empathy make you a better partner?

For starters, it helps partners rebuild trust and intimacy after a disruption.

You can test this out yourself by adding a dose of empathy to your relationship after a fight or disruption and see what a difference it can make when your partner feels understood by you. This works much better than continuing to prove you were right or logically trying to prove your partner wrong.

As therapist Terry Real asks: "Who is right? Who is wrong? Who cares?"

Using empathy to repair your differences changes the whole atmosphere—even if you don't agree with your partner (and often you won't) over the conflicting issue.

Just showing that you care enough to honestly try and understand your partner and where they are coming from often greatly reduces bad feelings toward each other on both sides.

As an added bonus, further relationship repair often occurs through empathy by your having increased awareness of how your partner is seeing YOU. If you know how they are seeing you, you have a tool to change how you are- or at least to change how you are coming across to them—which improves communication and connection.

The case of Mary and Jose

Mary and Jose were what is known in the field as a high conflict couple. She was highly critical and he was a man-child who could rarely ever do enough to please or satisfy Mary. Married 20 years, her main complaint was what she saw as Jose's poor financial and business decisions. They still lived in a small apartment while she saw her life dream of living in a nice house with a big back yard dwindling away day by day.

Then one day she found out that somehow her husband had borrowed enough money (in a highly leveraged deal) to loan **HIS PARENTS** the down payment for a house. Turns out his parents were almost homeless due to both of them having lost their jobs at age 60 because of Covid-19 related issues.

To say that Mary was livid would be a triumph of understatement.

Mary, of course, had a perfect right to be very upset over this breach of trust, this violation of normal marital boundaries, and having to deal with shattering of some of her life's dreams. To save their marriage, Jose had to grow up, establish priorities in life, and step up to the plate in terms of being a much better husband to Mary.

But, the healing process began by **helping Mary understand how things looked from Jose's point of view**. He couldn't disappoint or turn his back on his parents who were old, unemployed, ill and almost destitute. Of course, there were much better solutions to the dilemma than the one chosen by Jose.

The empathy part came in by Mary acknowledging that Jose saw himself as being a good son. Although she certainly didn't approve of what he did, to save the marriage she had to find a way to communicate to Jose that at least she could see things from his point of view, but that it was the wrong solution to the problem.

Once Jose felt that Mary could at least **SEE THINGS** as he did, they were eventually able to work things out and find solutions to their myriad issues around their marriage and his parents.



Successful couples find a way to repair these many disruptions, starting with empathy and then going on building their relationship. The trick is to see disruption as a normal part of life and relationship development. Expecting life to always go smoothly leads to trouble. Much research indicates that growth and creativity emerge out of the countless inevitable errors that occur when partners in intimate relationships interact with each other.

Anthony and Lisa

Speaking of expecting life to go smoothly, Anthony and Lisa learned this lesson of how new couples quickly get into trouble by underestimating the stresses involved in creating a new home with a stepchild.

Anthony and Lisa had been dating for three years and having a ball. After romantic weekends, each would go their own way and return to their individual lives. Things were great until they decided to move in together with her 14-year-old daughter Sandra.

You probably know what I am going to say next. Yes, that's right- Things changed overnight as they saw things in each other they had never seen before, especially around parenting.

To say that they had different parenting styles is a triumph of understatement.

Think Adolph Hitler for his parenting style and Mary Poppins for hers.

As an example, if the girl Sandra would leave her shoes in the leaving room, Anthony would yell, scream, berate, and throw the shoes up the stairs toward the daughter's bedroom while emphasizing the need for responsibility, maturity, and being more considerate of other people living in the house.

Lisa, on the other hand, would be understanding, gentle, tolerant, and forgiving toward her daughter. As she saw it, Sandra would eventually take her shoes upstairs - no big deal. She supported her daughter while throwing Anthony under the bus, so to speak.

The conflict continued not so much because of what each did, but how each saw themselves and each other.

Anthony saw himself as being a responsible parent while he saw Lisa as being a weak and ineffective parent to Sandra.

Furthermore, Anthony saw himself as the victim in this scenario. Because he saw himself as the victim (of disrespect by Sandra and of non-emotional support from Lisa) he felt justified in getting so angry. He was now offending from a victim's position.

Lisa, for her part, saw Anthony as a tyrant who had no business being so tough on **HER** daughter, especially since he had no "standing" in the disciplining of her daughter, not having raised her and not being the biological parent.



How would increased empathy have helped?

As is so commonly the case, both Anthony and Lisa saw themselves as in the right and the other as wrong. Each attacked the other without trying to understand how things looked from the viewpoint of the other. If they had, Anthony would have seen that Lisa had a strong need to protect her daughter from what she saw as an emotionally abusive man who had no right to impose his version of parenting her daughter so strictly in the first place.

Likewise, a more empathetic Lisa would have seen that Anthony was doing what he thought was right to impose more needed structure and self-discipline in Sandra to make her a better and more responsible person. Instead of getting defensive, Lisa might be more open to looking at her parenting skills to see if Anthony had some positive contributions to make in regard to her daughter.

Not that empathy alone would have solved all their parenting issues, but it would have served as a platform for discussion and increased understanding of each other's point of view. Feeling more understood, each would have become less defensive and felt less need to "push back" when fielding disagreements from the other.

So, how do we increase empathy in our relationship if one or both of you need improvement in this skill to make relationship repairs?

How To make Empathy Repairs - 4 steps

Empathy Repair Step 1 - Improve your listening skills

In my experience as a marital therapist observing many couples, I find that most people in a troubled relationship do not listen to their partner with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply (usually with the added intent of winning the argument or dispute)

Have you noticed that most people are poor listeners? Do you find yourself listening to your partner with an agenda or do you feel they listen to you with an agenda? When listening with empathy, your goal is to expand knowledge - not to justify your position in an argument, or to feed your own ego or self-esteem. When you listen with empathy it's not about getting evidence that you are right but to get more information for increased understanding.

Start by listening without so much defensiveness and judgement. When a relationship is in disrepair and out of harmony, it is easy to misread your partner, to distrust their motives, to feel a strong need to protect yourself. This is called defensiveness.



Reminds me of the old joke of two psychiatrists in an elevator:

One asks the other in a friendly and conversational tone: "how are you?" The other replies curtly: "why do you ask?"

To use improved listening skills as an empathic fix to a relationship disruption, ask your partner to again calmly explain their point of view. While they do, here is what you should do — **NOTHING**.

Just honestly *listen* without commenting right now, without judging, without contradicting, without defending, without justifying. Just listen and try to understand. That's it—again, your goal is to understand your partner when are listening with empathy.

Then, to further improve your listening skills, practice being more tolerant of your partner's way of communicating. Often we snap at our partner or become downright hostile toward them because we simply lack patience to tolerate their way of communicating. We call this "listening frustration."

They of course have a right to communicate any way they want to; your challenge is to develop the skills of patience and tolerance when listening to them.

The reasons for “listening frustration” can be quite varied. A common frustration is when a “get to the point” person interacts with a “let’s explore all aspects of the issue” person.

You ask for the time; they give you the history of clocks since they were invented. You ask them why they were late for class and they start the story with events that occurred two weeks previously.

Another common frustration occurs when a “fast and quick” thinker tries to communicate with a “slow but maybe deep” person. You might just flat out see yourself as smarter than the other as you discover you are always several steps ahead of them in thinking; you ask yourself “how they can be so darn slow?”

To develop more empathy, remind yourself that the world consists of people with many different ways of thinking in terms of the content of what they think, and the process they use to form thoughts and opinions. Remember too that you can be quite an expert in certain life skills, but a real dolt in other areas due to limitations in native abilities as well as limited life experiences in those areas. Many partners who dominate certain aspects of the marriage don’t look nearly as impressive outside of their narrow areas of expertise.

Empathy Repair Step 2 - Be on a mission to better understand your partner

A very effective repair skill to get back on track with your partner quickly is to use empathy as a tool to communicate that you want to know more about them, their feelings around an issue you might be conflicting over, why they do certain things, and how they perceive you around the conflict or situation.

Trust me! Using empathy as a kind of “not-knowing” inquiry will go much further in repair than other strategies partners often use such as launching into detailed explanations of things using the scientific method to prove your point or win the battle.

Often partner don't care how much you know until they know that you care.

Closeness or emotional connection between you and your partner will grow more by asking questions of each other in the right way- not by necessarily having the answers to things.

By the right way, I mean in a loving and non-hostile, non-aggressive way. With empathy, asking questions in the right way means to ask with love and gentleness, without putting your partner on the defensive.

It does NOT mean coming across like an angry District Attorney who fires accusatory questions like an archer with a quiver full of arrows ready to be launched.

Here are some inquiries you can make of your partner to expand your knowledge of what is going on:

Question #1 - Would you tell me more about what that was like for you?

Question #2 - How long have you felt that way?

Question #3 - What can I do to help?

Question #4 - I think I get it. is it true that you are feeling _____?

Question #5 - What other feelings do you have around that issue?

Question #6 - Did you see me as mad/upset/ when you told me that?

Empathy Repair Step 3 - Give empathic feedback responses or phrases

Dr John Gottman has developed a card deck for couples to increase intimacy. One series of cards is designed to help couples learn empathy questions to more deeply know and support the other.

Following are 10 sample phrases from the Gottman card deck which will help you express understanding and support for your partner's experience:

Phrase #1 - No Wonder you're upset

Phrase #2 - That makes sense that you would feel that way

Phrase #3 - That hurts me to hear

Phrase #4 - I wish you did not have to go through this

Phrase #5 - I would have also been disappointed by that

Phrase #6 - I'd feel the same way you do in your situation

Phrase #7 - That must have annoyed you

Phrase #8 - Let me try to summarize what you're saying. You're saying_____

Phrase #9 - What are your goals?

Phrase #10 - That sounds a little frightening.



Empathy Repair Step 4 - Attend to body language - both yours and your partners'

Do you remember my mentioning earlier that part of empathy is being aware and sensitive to how you are coming across to others? People are reading you all the time even if you are not saying anything.

I remember a personal experience that brought the point home to me big time. I was attending a conference and heard a speaker whose viewpoint I didn't agree with. I left the auditorium walking down a hallway. I must have been fretting and perturbed while thinking about what the speaker had said. A colleague (A friend of the speaker) was walking toward me from the other direction. He asked how I liked what the speaker had said. Not wanting to offend, I replied "Oh, I enjoyed him a lot." The colleague looked at me and said "Would you mind notifying your face of that?"

B-u-s-t-e-d!

Empathic people are aware of their own body language messages as well of those of their partner. Facial expressions, voice tone, muscle tension, hand gestures, eye contact all communicate messages to us of what is going on emotionally.

Something called "prosody" greatly affects how a message is communicated or understood by each of you, depending on intonation, rhythm of speech, pauses, what is stressed, inflections, etc. More on prosody later in this chapter.

Partners in trouble with each other lose awareness of how their partner is reacting to what they are saying. In couples therapy they often go on and on defending themselves or expressing opinions or complaints, completely oblivious to the body language shown by their partner during their narrative. So, of course, their partner feels unheard or misunderstood. From there it is a short leap to feelings of distance and disconnection.

CASE EXAMPLE: Trouble in Maui

Ruth and Bill were in couples therapy due to disconnection following his receiving a text from an old girlfriend while they were on Maui on vacation. Ruth saw the text while his phone was unattended as he was taking a shower. Although very upset, she decided to ignore the issue until they returned to California for her marital therapy session where she could better deal with the issue. They were married 10 years with 2 children.

From Bill's point of view, it was an ambush!

In therapy, she confronted Bill who explained that he was innocent, that he couldn't control who texted him, that he didn't respond to the text, that the old relationship had been over for 5 years, , etc etc etc.

All the while, Ruth seemed completely uninterested in what Bill was saying. The more he talked the more she became fascinated by a fly that was on the ceiling. Her body was turned away from his. There was sadness in her eyes. He kept talking, completely oblivious to her body language. There was no eye contact. His voice was an octave higher than his normal voice. His voice did not have conviction in it; truth was, he wasn't very convincing.

Yet, I knew he was telling the truth and the issue became a problem more because of her insecurity rather than from infidelity on Bill's part.

Finally, I interrupted and commented to Bill : "she doesn't believe you." Bill was shocked with this piece of news. Ruth acknowledged with her facial expression I had hit the nail on the head.

I suggested to Bill that we learn better skills to teach him how to instantly repair the done by improving non-verbal communication and body-language.

We started with eye-contact. I had them face each other, knee to knee and look into each other's eyes as they discussed the problem. You'd be amazed how communication changes when you are physically touching while talking.

I then taught them to observe how the other was reacting to what they were saying, so they could both be more effective communicators. If she rolled her eyes when he pleaded innocence, I taught him to notice that and to ask why she was rolling her eyes and what it meant.

We then worked on her accusatory voice tone which was triggering a defensive response in Bill. As she listened with more empathy, Bill calmed down and explained the situation (which turned out to be innocent).

Continuing, I suggested to Bill that he take a moment and get centered so that his words connected better with his emotions and convictions. This resulted in his coming across as more real and "present" as opposed to coming across like a deer caught in the headlights.

Scientists tell us that a high percentage of communication is done by our bodies—not just our words. Empathic people are very aware of both their own body language and the body language of others. Pay special attention to the following body language issues that communicate tons of information to others:

Facial expressions convey emotions that are universal—that is, people around the world have the same expressions as you do and also can read your facial emotions accurately without even knowing you. And you can do the same—read emotions and feelings on the faces of people from other cultures, with no words needed.

Eye contact is essential in marital communication. Many troubled couples stop looking at each other when they fight or conflict. Empathy requires that you become aware of the impact of what you are saying has on your partner and change what you are doing depending on how they are reacting to it.

Touch is a very basic way to connect to other human beings which is a natural form of communicating that everyone understands at some level. Touch can convey love or hostility, warmth or distance, resentment or forgiveness.

Stance and physical appearance communicate to us and others much about emotional states. "Getting in your face," for instance, usually communicates aggression. Standing very close to you, on the other hand, may be a message of affection and how they feel toward us. Parents standing with legs-apart stance with clenched hands on hips may be a scolding communication of displeasure with their children.

Prosody, as mentioned above, is the patterns of stress and intonation in the language used by you or your partner. Prosody provides clues about attitude or emotional state, through inflection, tone, and pitch of your words. For instance, "yea I liked the movie" can actually mean you liked the movie- or the exact opposite depending on inflection.



Empathy Repair Step 5 - Communicate with your partner in a way that they feel loved and cared for

A highly empathetic partner knows how to communicate sensitive things to you without triggering a negative reaction by surrounding it in an envelope of caring instead of criticalness.

The overall context or atmosphere in which an issue is presented makes all the difference in the world in terms of how it is received by your partner.

The case of Beatrice and Samuel: In therapy...

Beatrice to Samuel (in a very critical voice like a scolding mother): I told you a hundred times how you should exercise so you don't hurt yourself. But you won't believe me or listen to me. You keep exercising like you are a 20 year old and you keep re-injuring yourself."

Samuel to Beatrice: Why do you get so angry about it? You make me feel like a little boy. In fact, my exercise makes me feel better- it has nothing at all to do with you.

Therapist to Beatrice: Can you try saying that in a more loving way?

Beatrice to Samuel: (In a softer, caring tone) When you don't listen to me it makes me feel like you don't value my opinion. But, the fact is, I love you and it hurts me to see you continue to do destructive things to your body because I don't like to see you in pain."

Samuel to Beatrice: You know, that is the first time in a long time I felt loved by you when you criticize me. I promise I'll go to the doctor next week and do whatever he recommends regarding my exercise program.

If you love somebody, you take the time and effort to know them well enough to be able to predict how they will respond to what you are going to say or do.

And, you show love to your partner by taking the time present an issue so they will be able to hear the actual issue instead of listening through a fog of criticism, anger and self-preservation, as explained above.

Here are some ways to create that more loving atmosphere that has worked with other couples to repair things:

Timing is everything! Give your partner time to de-stress from work or parenting before hitting them with a sensitive issue. How you start the discussion and in what context you present it, plays a major role in the outcome. In fact, research shows the outcome of an argument can be predicted 90% of the time in the first 2 or 3 minutes.

Set the stage in those first 2-3 minutes if you want to have a better outcome. To create that loving atmosphere, give each other full attention. TV off. Kids in bed or playing somewhere else. No texting, talking on the phone, or playing video games while talking.

Tell your partner you love them both verbally and with body language while you present your issue.

Ask yourself how you would present the issue to a close same-gender friend without losing their friendship - and then present your couples issue to your partner the same way in the same tone.

Using the empathy repair skills explained above, **be civil, pleasant, "present" and "real" to your partner.** Obviously, avoid name-calling, bullying, verbal abuse, or nasty threats.

Remember-be sensitive. Observe their reactions to you and take them into account as you continue your discussion.



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