

UNSTUCK ADVICE

Live better every day

Empathy: The single best way to get unstuck

By Unstuck



When we feel stuck, at the heart of it, we feel lonely. We're not understood. We're not connected. Our worries sap the energy and imagination necessary to see our way out.

We need empathy. Stat!

We need someone to acknowledge us and show that they understand how we feel. To give us a sense of unfettered belonging that will unclog our stuck thoughts and feelings.

At the same time, we're obliged to engage in empathy ourselves.

We need to truly understand the people involved in our stuck moment: This will broaden our perspective and open up possibilities. Otherwise, it's too easy to pigeonhole situations, which only narrows our vision.

What empathy does for us

Empathy, in a nutshell, is the ability to hear and feel what someone is saying, verbally and otherwise, without casting judgment. It is the act of letting others know that you understand them and their situation. You feel what they feel.

The results can be magnificent.

When we're stuck and we receive empathy, it:

- Relieves alienation. We're freer to relax and open up because we feel accepted.
- Reduces the negative thoughts we have about ourselves by curtailing anxiety and shame.
- Encourages cooperation and resilience through a sense of connectedness.

When we're stuck and we exercise empathy for others, it:

- Helps us be more genuine with each other so we can get to the heart of the matter.
- Gives us real understanding of another person and situation, including hopes, fears, and hesitations.
- Builds trust and the possibility of cooperation.

All of these amazing benefits create a sense of wellbeing (duh).

With returns like that, why aren't we oozing empathy all the time? Because, says Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, we're in too much of a hurry, and we're too focused on what we're doing instead of what's going on around us.

So all we have to do is put the smartphone down, take our head out of the clouds, and

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TRIED AND TRUE WAYS TO GET UNSTUCK

- + Adapt fresh **perspectives**
- + Expand your **empathy**
- + Lead with **gratitude**
- + Welcome **play** into your life
- + Work like a **human**

I'M FEELING STUCK BECAUSE...

- + I don't know **what I want**
- + I don't want to **fail**
- + I keep **delaying**
- + I won't **speak up**
- + I'm **over** my head
- + I'm not **confident**
- + I'm **creatively** blocked
- + I'm **unmotivated**
- + I'm in a **negative** loop
- + It's a **relationship** thing
- + **Work** sucks
- + Life is **chaotic**
- + Something's **changed**
- + Something's **not right**
- + **Starting over** is hard

11 WAYS WE GET STUCK

look around? Well, it's a great start.

Empathy lesson 1: *Slow down and put yourself in a neutral state of mind.*

The brain is pre-set for empathy. There's a section called the supramarginal gyrus where the capacity for empathy and compassion resides. The scientists who discovered this in 2013 also learned that the brain does not activate empathy if 1. we're forced to make quick decisions and 2. our current emotional state is the opposite of the other person's (I'm having a good day; nothing is going right for you).

Empathy lesson 2: *Consciously ask yourself, "How might this person think and feel about this?"*

Researchers have also learned that people with low empathy tendencies (such as narcissists) can increase their ability to step outside of themselves when directed to look at a situation from another's point of view.

Empathy lesson 3: *Exercise your mind in ways that help empathy occur more naturally.*

Science has known for more than 100 years that the brain is "plastic," meaning it can reorganize itself and make new connections. Now, several recent studies have found that meditation can grow fibers that connect separate areas of the brain. This interconnectedness builds "the gateway of empathy and compassion through mindful meditation," says Dr. Dan Siegel, executive director of the Mindsight Institute. The loving-kindness meditation, in particular, helped direct the brain's attention to a more compassionate mindset.

How to build an empathy habit

Meditation can pave a wider gateway to our empathy, but like guest-speaking at an event, we need to know what to do once we get there. So let's break empathy down into five areas that are practicable. After awhile, those pieces should naturally put themselves back together again.

1. Understand yourself. Before we can extend empathy to someone else, it helps to be in touch with our own experiences and emotions, and what they've taught us. A shining example of this is Zak Ebrahim, who outed himself at TED 2014 as the peace-loving son of a terrorist. Throughout his childhood, he was bullied for his appearance. This, he says, "created a sense of empathy in me toward the suffering of others." (You can watch his talk here.)

2. Listen fully. When you follow these rules, you'll hear more:

- Let the other person do most of the talking.
- Look at the speaker.
- Don't interrupt but do make encouraging responses and nods.
- Ask questions that allow the speaker to expand on the topic.

3. Recognize the unspoken. Humans speak volumes with their eyes and facial expressions (ever notice someone whose mouth is smiling but her eyes aren't?). Test your eye IQ with this simple, but not so easy, eye-reading test. Also look for microexpressions that occur in less than a second and reveal how someone is feeling at that moment. This guide will help you read them.

4. Reserve judgment. Put aside your point of view so you can consciously hear and see the situation from someone else's. You don't have to agree with the other person, but you do need to accept what is, rather than focus on what you think it should be. If you find yourself lapsing into judgment mode, switch to curiosity and try to get a better understanding of the situation.

5. Acknowledge. The goal is to let the speaker know that you've heard and understood what he's saying. This usually includes acknowledging feelings ("that sounds hard,"

- + **Tunnel Visionary:** blinded to new possibilities
- + **Deflated Doer:** feeling unmotivated
- + **Drifter:** feeling directionless
- + **Waffler:** unable to decide
- + **Reluctant Adapter:** resisting change
- + **Idle Achiever:** stalled by the details
- + **Fuzzy Forecaster:** unable to see the vision clearly
- + **Ad Libber:** operating without a plan
- + **Perplexed Planner:** caught in what is instead of what could be
- + **Lone Leader:** not asking for help
- + **Avoider:** painfully procrastinating

“you seem overwhelmed”) as well as beliefs. This encourages the other person to continue to open up. NB: Acknowledging never involves giving advice, changing the topic, or disapproving.

You can practice these empathy interactions with a friend by sharing experiences and thoughts with other each that you might not ordinarily reveal.

Ask your partner some of the questions below or any from this [list](#) designed by social psychology researcher Arthur Aron to foster closeness by building empathy. Allow yourself to be vulnerable and, in turn, listen without judgment:

- What do you feel most grateful for in your life?
- If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
- Is there something that you’ve dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven’t you done it?
- What is an embarrassing moment in your life?
- What is a problem you’re dealing with right now that you wish you had help with?

The more you practice empathy, the stronger those muscles become until you can count on them to help you — and others — in any stuck moment.

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