



## FROM SYMPATHY TO *empathy*

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**W**hen I was in 7th grade, my English teacher, Mrs. Hill, required us to memorize all the prepositions (there are a lot of them!). I loved Mrs. Hill, was a good student, and didn't want to get grounded, so of course I did the assignment, even though it didn't seem practical. Nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs, interjections! Now those were valuable. How helpful could a pesky little preposition be, anyway?

Fast forward 45 years and check out these two definitions:

**sym·pa·thy** *noun* — feeling **for** someone

**em·pa·thy** *noun* — feeling **with** someone

Sympathy says, "I'm sorry you're in pain." Empathy says, "I feel your pain." Sympathy understands that a person is in pain. Empathy feels the same pain as the other person. Sympathy is cognitive. Empathy is emotional.

Sympathy isn't bad. It's appropriate to be sympathetic when someone is going through a difficult time, to let them know you are thinking about them and might be able to help in some way. But sympathy can be a little slippery. There's a thin line between feeling for someone and feeling sorry for someone.

When that line gets crossed, the effect is usually that the sympathizer feels good for "doing something," but the person in pain feels talked about instead of talked with (more prepositions!). That's a lonely feeling, and not at all helpful.

If sympathy is a chicken, providing eggs from the sideline, empathy is a pig, fully committed and bringing the bacon. When you show or offer empathy, you are saying, "I see you. I have experienced the emotion you are feeling, and I am willing to feel it again so you are not alone. I cannot fix what broke, but I will help you hold the pieces." Empathy brings connection, and connection brings energy and healing.

Forty-five years ago, empathy wasn't talked about much, and certainly not in the context of the workplace. Work is for work. Metrics and goals, productivity and processes, revenue! Now those are valuable. How helpful could pesky feelings be, anyway? Check this out:

*Empathy [...] is crucial for both personal well-being and positive social interactions. It fosters stronger relationships, enhances communication, and promotes a more compassionate and understanding society.*

Huh. Turns out those pesky prepositions make a difference!