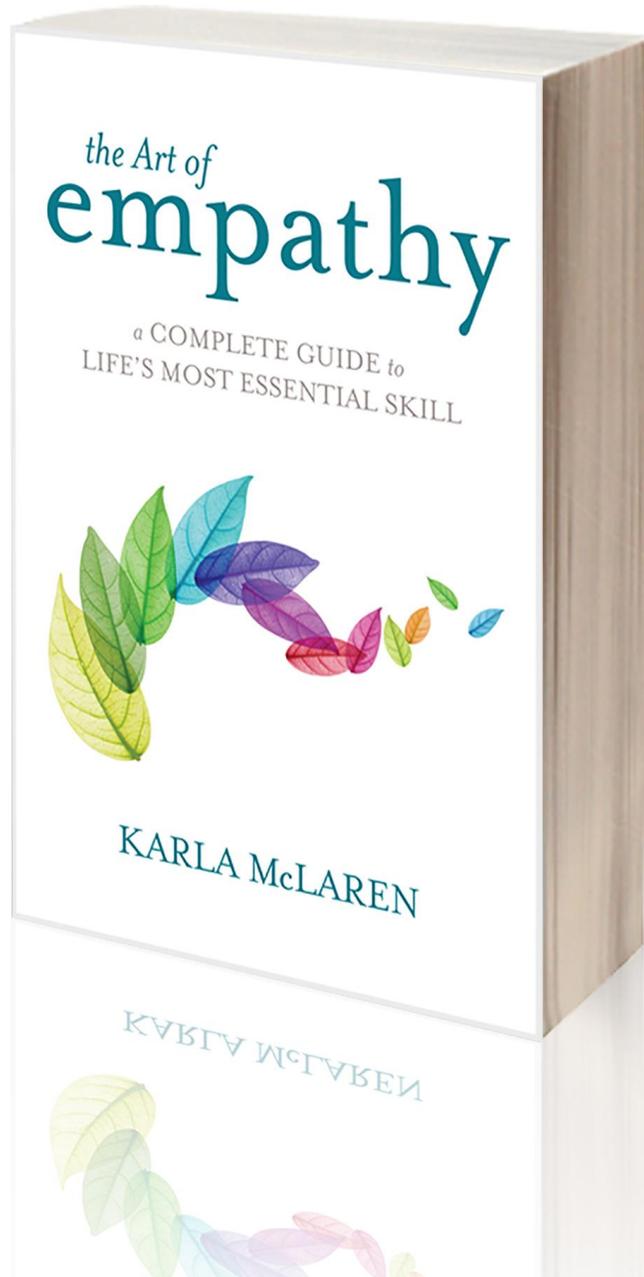


A Reading Guide for

The Art of Empathy

A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill

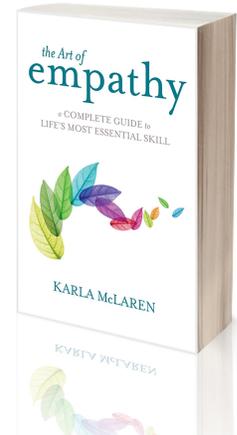


A Reading Guide for The Art of Empathy

A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill

Welcome!

This guide will support your reading of *The Art of Empathy* by Karla McLaren, M.Ed., and it will help you deepen your understanding of emotions, empathy, yourself, and your relationships. You can use this reading guide on your own, or you can use it to start a reading group.



How to Start a Reading Group for *The Art of Empathy*

- Ask friends and family members if they'd like to learn more about empathy and emotions with you.
- Reach out to people from work, your gym, or your church (etc.) and consider posting flyers at these places with information about how to join your group.
- Reach out on social media sites such as Facebook, Meetup, or Twitter by sharing the book and letting people know you'll be starting a reading group.
- Ask at your local bookstore or library. Some bookstores and libraries offer free meeting rooms for reading groups, and some keep lists of people who want to join new groups.
- Keep the group to 12 members or fewer; if you have more than this, there may not be enough time for everyone to talk and share their impressions.

Organizing Your Reading Group

You can organize your reading schedule ahead of time, or you can wait until all of your group members are present to choose your schedule and design your reading/discussion processes together.

- Find a location that's convenient for everyone, or consider hosting the meeting at a different member's home each session.
- Meetings should be scheduled every 3 to 4 weeks to give people time to read. You can assign single chapters or whole sections, depending on your members' wishes and time constraints.
- Schedule your meetings for between 1 and 3 hours, depending on the size of the group and the amount of discussion you'd like to have.
- Decide whether or not food will be available at the meetings, and if so, how the food will be provided and by whom.
- Discuss the best ways to communicate with your group between meetings. The leader(s) should remind members of each meeting, and perhaps share resources with the group based on the topics to be discussed in each meeting.

Leading Your Reading Group

You can build healthy group dynamics by maintaining clear expectations, staying on topic, keeping to a clear schedule, and keeping your group members focused on their reading. You'll want to be fluid and responsive to the needs of individuals, yet also maintain a cohesive vision for the group as a whole.

- The first meeting should be a relaxed gathering for members to meet and discuss their goals for the group. Consider leading a guided activity, or asking 3 to 4 questions about empathy, such as:
 1. **What is your current definition of empathy?**
 2. **If you hear someone called *empathic*, what do you think of?**
 3. **How important is empathy in your relationships?**
 4. **Where did you learn how to empathize with others?**
- The leader(s) should also provide an overview of *The Art of Empathy* and talk about why you wanted to start the reading group.
- Ground rules should be set and the leader(s) should make it clear to members that meetings are not group therapy sessions and do not replace individual counseling or therapy.
- Leader(s) can ask questions throughout the discussion and offer support as needed or if the group gets stuck.
- Be careful that the conversation doesn't digress or focus too much on one person's story or one topic. Group leader(s) should work to keep the discussion flowing and ensure that everyone has a chance to talk and share if they want to.
- You can start each meeting by going around the group and having each person check in about their current situation or their impressions of that session's reading (if they want to; it's perfectly fine for people to pass).
- If you need more information about working with a reading group, the [Kansas City Public Library](#) has a very helpful set of guidelines.

Concluding your Reading Group

When your group is through reading *The Art of Empathy*, you may want to continue meeting casually as friends, or you may want to start over with a new book that interests you.

If you'd like to read Karla McLaren's earlier book, *The Language of Emotions: What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You* (Sounds True, 2010), the free reading guide for that book is available on [The Language of Emotions](#) page at KarlaMcLaren.com.

Thank you for bringing your unique empathic artistry to our waiting world!

The Art of Empathy Reading Guide

These are suggestions for deepening your reading of *The Art of Empathy*; however, your group may want to focus on different topics in each chapter. Feel free to shift your focus to meet the needs and interests of your group members.

Preface and Part One: Welcoming Empathy into Your Life

Chapter 1

What Is Empathy and Why Is It Important?

Welcome and Discussion: Take some time to talk about why your group members are interested in learning more about empathy. What are each of you hoping to gain from reading and discussing *The Art of Empathy*?

The Definition of Empathy

The definition of empathy is currently being argued about in the many different research fields. There are several competing definitions of empathy, but as a lifelong hyper-empath, Karla brings a unique understanding to the topic. She defines empathy this way:

“**Empathy** is a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.” (pg. 4)

Discussion: Does this definition of empathy differ from your own? What are some ways that you experience empathy in your daily life?

Identifying Empaths

Although we may not always be aware of it, we all have empathic skills and abilities. Everyone is empathic to a greater or lesser degree. We are born with many of these abilities, and we develop them through interactions with others. The difference between being empathic and being an *empath* is a matter of intention and awareness.

“An **empath** is someone who is aware that he or she reads emotions, nuances, subtexts, undercurrents, intentions, thoughts, social space, interactions, relational behaviors, body language, and gestural language to a greater degree than is deemed normal.” (pg. 5)

Discussion: On pages 6-9, Karla describes an empathic observation of a discussion between two people. Have you ever observed people in this way, where you’re almost doing an internal play-by-play of their interaction?

Exercise: What is the level of your empathic abilities at this moment? Fill out the inventory on pages 13-15, and share your results with your group (of course, you can also keep your results private). As you observe your score, know that you can increase, decrease, or become more comfortable with your empathy at any stage of your life. That's what *The Art of Empathy* is about.



Chapter 2

Defining and Redefining Empathy: *An Empathic Approach*

This chapter explores empathy research, history, and stereotypes – and it describes Karla McLaren's original *Six Essential Aspects of Empathy* model. This chapter also focuses on the importance of self-empathy, and explores the problems that can arise when we don't know how to work with our empathic abilities.

Welcoming those who have been exiled

“The deeply mistaken exclusion of boys, men, and autistic people from the world of fully realized empathy tells us that the study of empathy is a very active and tumultuous (and in some cases, very backward) undertaking. Clearly the story of empathy is still being written.” (pg. 22)

Discussion: How do stereotypes like these affect people in your own life? Have you discovered empathy in people who are stereotyped as unempathic?

A Short History

“The concept of *Einfühlung* really helps us encompass the larger aspects of the empathic experience, and it helps us include animals, art, literature, ideas, and symbols in the category of things we can empathize with.” (pg. 24)

Discussion: Have you noticed, in yourself or others, a strong *Einfühlung* relationship with non-human things?

The Six Essential Aspects of Empathy

The study of empathy is ongoing, but Karla's work relies upon the fact that empathy is a skill that can be developed (or calmed down in the case of hyper-empathy), no matter where you are on the empathic continuum. Karla has identified six aspects of empathy and organized them in a unique and step-by-step way (see pages 26-27).

- 1) Emotion Contagion:** This is your ability to sense that an emotion is occurring in yourself or another person, or that an emotion is expected from you.
- 2) Empathic Accuracy:** This is your ability to accurately identify and understand emotional states, thoughts, and intentions in yourself and others.

- 3) **Emotion Regulation:** This is your ability to understand and regulate your own emotions so that you can function skillfully in the presence of emotions.
- 4) **Perspective Taking:** This is your ability to put yourself in the place of others and sense how they might be thinking and feeling.
- 5) **Concern for Others:** This is your capacity to care about others and show compassion for their well-being.
- 6) **Perceptive Engagement:** This full expression of your empathy is dependent upon the first five aspects, and it helps you respond or act in a way that works for others.
An important note: Sometimes, the most empathic action may be to do nothing at all, if people need their space and privacy!

Discussion: Discuss each of the aspects in your group: Which aspects of empathy are strongest for you at this time? Which aspects would you like to improve upon? Share instances where you were able to work skillfully with one or more of these aspects.



Chapter 3

An Empath's Guide to Empathy: *Developing Your Social and Emotional Intelligence*

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the work of two social scientists – Howard Gardner and Richard Davidson – whose concepts help people understand their intelligence and their unique emotional styles.

Your Seven Intelligences

Although most information is taught to us through logic and reason, Gardner argues that people have multiple types of intelligence, which include: Logical; Linguistic; Musical; Bodily-Kinesthetic; Spatial; Interpersonal; and Intrapersonal.

Discussion: What intelligences do you relate to most from Gardner's multiple intelligences? Which are strongest for you? How might schooling change if other intelligences were treated as equal to the logical one?

Your Emotional Style

Davidson developed these six dimensions of emotional styles: Resilience; Outlook; Social Intuition; Self-Awareness; Sensitivity to Context; and Attention. See Appendix B on pages 287-288 for a deeper look at these emotional styles.

Discussion: Where do you fall on the various dimensions of Davidson's emotional styles? What are some everyday examples of these styles working (or not working) in your life?

Four Ideas that Ensure Emotional Confusion (Pages 64 to 81)

Karla has identified four common ideas about emotions that actually stop us from understanding, working with, or learning from our emotions in any real way. Fortunately, we can explore and unlearn these harmful ideas and reclaim our emotional awareness.

- 1) **The Problem with Valencing:** There are no positive *or* negative emotions. All emotions are necessary!
- 2) **The Problem with Expression and Repression:** Instead of suppressing emotions or blowing up with them, Karla suggests learning how to channel them so that you can hear what they came to tell you. Channeling helps you listen to and work with your emotions skillfully.
- 3) **The Problem of Nuance:** You can learn to recognize emotions at many different levels of intensity (see the *Emotional Vocabulary List* on pages 283-286). You can also download free copies of this list at Karla McLaren's website: [*Your Free Emotional Vocabulary List*](#).
- 4) **The Problem of Quantity:** You can learn how to identify mixed and multiple emotions (such as bittersweet and nostalgia) because that's how they arise in many cases.

Exercise and Discussion: On pages 72-73 there is a list of 11 statements that describe emotional skills based on nuance. These are skills that belong to the softest and most subtle activation of specific emotions. As you go through the list and discover your own emotional strengths, are there any surprises? Share your results, questions, or realizations with each other.



Chapter 4

An Empath's Guide to Emotions: *Why Emotions Arise*

This chapter focuses on sixteen different emotions and their gifts. It also explores the difference between emotions and feelings and describes the flow of emotions from stimulus to action.

Discussion: Refer to the list of emotions on pages 84-88. Were any of these descriptions surprising to you? Which emotions are most comfortable for you right now – and which would you like to work on or explore?

How Much Emotion is Too Much?

Emotions are vital and important, yet as we all know, they can also be very uncomfortable if they're too intense, or if they repeat constantly. On pages 88-93, Karla focuses on Fear and Anger to illustrate what a situation of *too much* emotion might look like.

“The way to know when you need help is simple: when your emotions repeat incessantly and do not resolve, or when they overwhelm you or the people in your life, it's time to find out what's going on.” (pg. 88)

Discussion: Besides Anger and Fear, what might *too much emotion* look like for other emotions?

Feeling, Naming, and Knowing

Identifying and naming emotions (internally or out loud) has been shown to help people tolerate physical and emotional pain. Identifying and naming your emotions can also help you: ground and focus yourself; increase your Emotion Regulation skills; understand how your emotions work and why they arise; make informed decisions; and complete the actions your emotions require. This chapter also includes a flow chart to help you track the progression from stimulus to emotion to action:

“Emotionally evocative stimulus → Emotion → Feeling → Naming →
Questioning the emotion → Acting on the information the emotion provides **OR** → *Deciding
not to act* because the stimulus is invalid.” (pg. 97)

Discussion: Can you think of situations in which you have moved through this emotive process from beginning to end? If not, imagine a hypothetical situation where you could intentionally move through these steps.



Chapter 5

The Art of Empathy: Gathering Your Tools

This chapter introduces you to the five Empathic Mindfulness practices and connects them to healthy and effective empathizing.

Getting Grounded

Any practice can be grounding if it creates a sense of relaxation and focus. This intentional practice identifies the emotional gifts and skills involved in healthy grounding: the relaxing gifts of soft sadness; and the focusing gifts of soft fear.

Exercise and Discussion: Practice grounding (pg. 106) in your group and feel into the sensations of being grounded. Does this feel any different than your usual state? If you're pretty grounded regularly, what are your everyday grounding practices?

Defining Your Boundaries

This practice works intentionally with the gifts of soft anger, which help you define yourself and notice if your boundaries are being challenged. Healthy boundaries also rely upon the gifts of soft shame, which monitor your actions and make sure that you don't break your own boundaries or the boundaries of others.

Exercise and Discussion: Practice defining boundaries (pgs. 111-113) as a group and ask yourselves: Do you regularly have this much personal space in which to work with your own thoughts and emotions?

Burning Contracts

This empathic mindfulness practice helps you channel your emotions and release old behaviors and beliefs that no longer serve you.

“This empathic process of contract burning helps you meet each of your behaviors, attitudes, and stances from a grounded position of present-day choice and personal autonomy. It also gives you a way to channel emotions intentionally and to become more aware of the gifts and challenges that live inside each of your reactions, stances, behaviors, and emotions.” (pg. 115)

Discussion and Activity: What are some contracts you have made with yourself or others that you’d like to burn? If it feels right, you can create a group activity and write out unwanted contracts on pieces of paper. When you’ve written everything you need to, you can roll up the paper, crumple it, tear it up, throw it away, recycle it, or even burn it in a fireplace or fire pit (be careful!).

Conscious Complaining

Complaining in a purposeful and conscious way is emotionally honest and can often be fun. It can help uncover things that are bothering you and reconnect you to your emotions. Unlike positive affirmations, Conscious Complaining honors all of your emotions instead of trying to force happiness into every situation.

“Conscious complaining is healing because it speaks to your real issues from within your actual emotive sense of things – it addresses your actual concerns, and it welcomes your real emotions and gives them a voice.” (pg. 124)

Discussion: Have you ever complained consciously? Discuss the difference between conscious complaining, *unconscious* complaining, and positive affirmations.

Rejuvenating Yourself

Rejuvenation is an empathic mindfulness practice that you can use anywhere and at any time. You can also rejuvenate yourself quickly, or take as much time as you like.

Exercise and Discussion: Practice rejuvenation (pg. 126) as a group and discuss your response to this self-soothing approach that intentionally accesses soft and grounded joy. As you think through your day or your week, do you have any regular rejuvenation practices?

How to tell if an emotion is yours or someone else's

Learning to form strong, healthy boundaries will help you determine which emotions are yours and which belong to others. These empathic mindfulness practices will help you work skillfully with emotions, no matter where they come from.

Discussion: When is it comfortable to feel the emotions of others? When is it uncomfortable, and why?



Part Two: Bringing Your Empathy into the World

Chapter 6

Empaths At Home: Creating a Sanctuary Where Empathy Can Flourish

Healthy empathy requires sensitivity, self-care, grounding, and a sense of comfort which can come, in part, from your surroundings. This chapter focuses on your home environment and asks: Is this a healing space for an empathic and sensitive person?

“As you walk around your home, step outside of yourself and ask, “Who lives here?” What kind of person lives in your home, and what is important to this person? Is this person studious or active, solitary or a part of many social groups, organized or free form? Is this person artistic, scientific, romantic, reserved, or gregarious? Who lives here?” (pg. 140)

Discussion: Share the ways that you have created an empathic home environment for yourself, your family, and your loved ones – and feel free to gather ideas from your group members. We can all use more ideas for creating healthy and supportive homes.

“Your home can act as a kind of threshold between you and the outside world. It can act as a supportive backstage area where you can rest, recharge, replenish, and take a break from the emotional needs of others (and from emotional commotion in general). Your home can be an extension of your boundary-setting practice; it can help you learn how to set and maintain boundaries in the physical world as you learn to define yourself and set boundaries in your interactions and your relationships.” (pg. 142)

The Healing Power of Artistic Expression

Art is a powerful way to express yourself and balance your receptivity with the intentional use of emotionally-expressive activities.

“As you observe your home, look for your artistic practice, which can be as elaborate as having a large weaving loom in your front room, or as compact as the special journal you

use to write haiku. Your art form can be movement based or it can be located in your meditative practice. Your art can be cooking, baking, or home design. It can also be your mathematical or scientific activities, because both of these fields can engage you completely as you work to organize, describe, and express your understanding of natural phenomenon.” (pg. 145)

Discussion: What are your artistic or expressive practices? Are there any practices that you would like to integrate into your everyday life?

Movement as an Art Form

Movement is another form of artistic expression that can be helpful to sensitive, receptive, and empathic people. Unfortunately, our modern-day computer and screen time is taking many of us away from movement practices. This screen time can also mire us in the endless conflicts that people create online.

“As you work to create a life that will nurture you as a healthy and happy empath, take a close look at your electronic interactions. If they’re supporting your emotional awareness in a welcoming and healthy social environment, then hooray! But if your social media interactions are troubling or conflict-based, or if they’re pulling your focus to a screen pretty much every minute of the day, then it’s time to set some time limits on social media so that you can have some privacy, reduce your receptive activities, and restore your equilibrium with healthy and intentional expressive practices like art, movement, or your empathic mindfulness skills.” (pg. 148)

Discussion: How do you integrate movement into your life as an empathic practice? Or, what are some of the distractions that keep you away from movement practices?

To Sleep Perchance to Dream

Sleep is a vital part of your mental, emotional, and physical health. Sleep helps you integrate your learning, process your day, let go of what’s not important, keep what is important, and prepare for tomorrow.

“In the past few decades, research into sleep has blossomed, and new findings about the importance of sleep seem to appear every week. Good sleep has been found to increase your cognitive skills, help you integrate knowledge, strengthen your memory, help you heal from injuries, help children grow, help you reset your circadian rhythms and regulate your hormones, and help you regulate your mood. All of these positive benefits of sleep are necessary for your whole and healthy life, but for your empathic skills specifically, the mood and cognition benefits of good sleep are particularly important.”(pg. 149)

Discussion: How is your sleep hygiene? Could you change your sleeping environment and habits to ensure a better night's sleep? Share some ideas for good sleep in your group.

When Healthy Eating Goes Wrong

Orthorexia is an extreme and strict type of healthy eating behavior that can become an obsession. In many cases, it can be a helpful distraction for hyper-empathic people who want to bring order to their lives.

“We all use comfort food to soothe ourselves after a rotten day, or when we’re lonely, or when we’re anxious, or angry, or bored. Food is delightful, and it can be a surrogate for just about anything – love, happiness, friendship, emotion regulation, relaxation, freedom ... anything. What I notice in extreme healthy eating is that food can become not just a comfort, but also a kind of magical talisman that creates order, structure, and the appearance that you’re managing your life and taking top-notch care of yourself.” (pg. 152)

Discussion: What comfort foods help you soothe and ground yourself? Or do food restrictions feel soothing for you? Is there any connection between eating and hyper-empathy for you?

Developing Bodily Sources of Stability, Comfort, and Empowerment

At all times, there are parts of your body that feel comfortable and can be used as a resource, especially when another part of your body is in pain or you are experiencing seemingly unmanageable emotions.

“With resourcing, you can learn how to pay attention to more than one thing. So, if you have a horrible headache, you use resourcing not to pretend that your headache is gone, but to open up your focus to include the comfort that exists in, for instance, your arm or your knee.” (pg. 156)

Discussion and Exercise: Many people dissociate in response to pain or emotional upheaval, but have you ever worked with discomfort in an embodied way? Try this resourcing practice with the group and discuss your response to it.

Learning to Create Thresholds

Thresholding helps you set physical boundaries for yourself. We all create thresholds in some way, and becoming aware of your natural thresholding skills helps you become more conscious of your boundaries.

“I view our threshold awareness as an empathic skill, and I'd say that we all have it to some degree.... Thresholding is a physical form of setting my boundaries, but it's also a part of my resourcing practice, because it helps me find sources of calm and freedom

within myself – especially when those things are not available in the external environment.” (pg. 158)

Discussion: Discuss the thresholds you build in your everyday life – with clothing, attitude, eye contact (or lack of it), physical barriers, tidiness, sloppiness, and so forth. How do these thresholds support you? How could you make them more conscious, respectful, and intentional (if they’re not already)?

Evaluating Your Empathic Sanctuary

Your home has the potential to be a wonderfully healing and restorative sanctuary for you.

“... if your home environment is currently unsupportive and there’s not much that you can do – you can still use your empathic mindfulness skills, resourcing skills, and thresholding abilities to create a portable empathic sanctuary inside your own body. You can also reach out for the support of sensitive and empathic relationships – through artistic expression, intellectual pursuits, movement, nature, animals, and other empathic people.” (pg. 161)

Discussion: Does your current home environment support you, or are there changes you would like to make? If you are unable to make changes to your home, what are other ways to create an empathically supportive space for yourself?



Chapter 7

Empathic Friendships, Empathic Love: Relationships as an Empathic Art Form

Healthy interaction is essential for empaths, whether the interactions are with other people or with art, movement, or ideas. This chapter focuses on how to find and create those healthy and supportive interactions.

How Empathic are Your Loved Ones?

Now that you are familiar with the *Six Essential Aspects of Empathy*, you can observe the people who are closest to you and gauge their abilities in each of the six aspects.

“As you work with your own empathic skills, it’s tremendously important to find people who already have empathic skills of their own or who are willing to develop them.” (pg. 164)

Discussion: Which empathic skills are present or lacking in the people who are closest to you?

Understanding Your Emotional Style Compatibility

Using Richard Davidson’s six dimensions of emotional style can also give you more insight into the emotional and empathic compatibility of your relationships.

“Does it matter to you if you and your loved ones are very far apart in one or more of these dimensions? Do these differences add to the richness of your relationships, or do they create discord?” (pg. 168)

Discussion: As you observe each of Davidson’s emotional style dimensions in your friends and family, take note of your similarities and your differences. Do they matter? If so, why?

Introducing Emotion Work

Though we’re not taught to be aware of it, we perform *emotion work* in most (or all) of our relationships.

“All of this emotion work is normal and natural, because, empathically speaking, we all work to help each other function (and become more skilled) in the social world. Emotion work is what makes relationships flow smoothly; it’s what helps us relate to and support each other; and it’s what helps us mature as emotional, social, and empathic beings. However, emotion work *is* work, and if you’re not aware of how much emotion work you do (or how much you expect others to do for you), then empathic burnout is a very real possibility – for everyone.” (pg. 172)

Discussion: What areas in your life require the most emotion work? Is this work nourishing or draining? And who does supportive emotion work for you?

Identifying Your Intimacy Zones

As you empathically observe your relationships, you can learn what’s important to you and what’s working (or not). This process of deciding what you value, what you want, and what’s meaningful to you relies upon the “sociological emotions” of jealousy and envy.

“In their soft, free-flowing states, these two emotions help you focus on what you need from your relationships. They also help you discern the depth of love and care you receive, the loyalty and security you feel, and the quality of your connection to stable sources of love, faithfulness, resources, recognition, and security.” (pg. 173)

Discussion: What is your relationship with your jealousy and envy? Have you ever heard that they can help you choose healthy and supportive jobs and relationships – or have you only heard of them as supposedly negative emotions?

Swashbucklers of Love

Swashbucklers of love, as Karla McLaren calls them, are people who have an awesome and heroic ability to love despite endless heartaches and struggles. As valiant as this may be, it would probably be healthier and more rewarding for swashbucklers to find emotionally skilled and compatible people to love.

“In their intimate empathic inner circles – in the areas closest to their bodies and their hearts – empaths will often choose mates who cannot get into sync with them, don’t have emotional skills, and aren’t empathically competent. These empaths then throw themselves at these unworkable relationships, as if they’re in a game of Red Rover or as if they’re on a heroic odyssey through the underworld, filled with impossible tasks and mythical beasts.” (pg. 174)

Discussion: Do you choose partners who support you and have strong emotional and empathic skills, or are you a swashbuckler of love? If you are, where did you learn this approach?

Finding Empathic Friends in Your Community

Friendships and community are vital to your empathic health and there are many free activities that can help you cultivate friends and connections. However, don’t feel as if you have to fill your life with people; *more* friends doesn’t necessarily mean *better* friends.

“Thankfully, it doesn’t seem to matter how many relationships you have; what matters is their quality. The *Scientific American Mind* article about frenemies includes studies that found that the sheer number of friends a person has is not as important as the quality of those friendships; the health-building, empathy-increasing value of friendships depends on the quality of your friendships, and not on their quantity. One excellent friend is all you need. If you can gather more, great; but one will do. Whew!” (pg. 179)

Discussion: Do you have empathic friendships in your life or in your online community? If you have close friends in both places, how do these in-person and online friendships differ?



Chapter 8

Empathic Communication: Getting Into Sync with Others

There are a number of communication practices in this chapter. This reading guide doesn’t cover all of them, but your group can focus on whichever ones you like best.

Your empathic skills develop and flourish in your interactions with others. The deeper and more varied your connections are, the stronger your empathic abilities will be. Specific techniques such as reflective listening may be useful in certain situations, but they can also be too contrived.

“... it’s really important to remember that empathy is a skill you already possess and that you can just relax and hang out with people, listen to them, make mistakes (and apologize if you do), and be empathic simply because you already are.” (pg. 186)

Discussion: Do you find that you have to use techniques in order to communicate with others, or can you engage without a lot of effort? If you had to learn how to communicate with sensitivity, what techniques were helpful for you?

Learning to Identify Emotions in Others

Good communication requires empathic skills. Specifically, Perspective Taking is essential so that you know how others feel and what's important to them. However, if you have difficulty with identifying or working with emotions, you may not be able to accurately take the perspective of others.

“As you work with troubling emotions in yourself, remember to resource yourself when other people are feeling them (or repressing them). Yes, those emotions may be problematic for you right now, but remember your resourcing practice (page 155) and remind yourself that there are places in your body that are grounded, focused, calm, and resourceful.” (pg. 187)

Discussion: Are there emotions that you can't empathize with right now? Or do you become confused or overwhelmed in the presence of multiple emotions? When you recognize that people are feeling difficult emotions or multiple emotions, how do you respond?

Learning People Intentionally

Body language and facial expressions can provide valuable clues about which emotions other people are feeling. However, body language and facial expressions aren't universal, and you can become confused if you focus on them – especially when people are culturally or neurologically different from you. You may need to learn some people intentionally and adjust to their unique signals.

“In this technique, you use another person's body language to open a conversation and find out whether what you're picking up is true. The trick to this is to keep your empathic mitts off of their behavior until the latter part of the sentence, where you ask about your impressions in the form of a question. So you don't say: “Your gloomy face and your surrendering arm movements tell me that you've given up,” because that's not a question, and you've already imposed your own emotions onto the person's body. That violates all kinds of boundaries, and besides, you may be wrong.” (pg. 188)

Exercise and Discussion: Have you ever read someone's facial expressions or body language incorrectly? Or has anyone ever read you incorrectly? If so, practice *Learning People Intentionally* in your group and see if you can adjust your awareness to tune into the signals of others.

Conscious Complaining With a Partner

You learned Conscious Complaining as a solo technique, but you can also open the practice to include a partner (as long as you're not in conflict with each other, see pgs. 191-192). With this practice, you can both express your emotions honestly in an atmosphere of acceptance and humor, and neither of you has to be an expert or an advice-giver. All that you have to do is complain when it's your turn, and listen and provide support when it's not!

“Consciously complaining with your friends is a wonderful way to clear the air and be emotionally honest in the presence of another, and it sets healthy behavioral boundaries around a behavior that's usually unconscious and unrewarding. In this practice, each of you takes responsibility for learning how to name and listen to your own emotions, which will add immeasurably to your emotional skills.” (pgs. 192-193)

Activity and Discussion: Pair up and practice *Conscious Complaining with a Partner* in your group (in workshops, we generally give each partner a 3-minute time limit and then have the partners switch places). When you're both finished with your complaining, ask yourselves: How did it feel to be the listener who didn't have to give any advice? And how did it feel to be the complainer when you knew that it was perfectly okay to complain?

Emotions as a Prerequisite to Truly Empathic Communication

On pages 193-198, each emotion is explored in terms of why it arises and how you can support people who are feeling that emotion. Each emotion has an important job to do, and when you know how and why emotions work, you can offer truly empathic support to others.

Discussion: Choose an emotion that a person in your life is struggling with, and discuss how you might support this person now that you have a better idea about what the emotion is trying to do.

Angry about Anger, Afraid of Fear, Ashamed of Shame

Emotional awareness is a powerful skill, but if people haven't learned how to identify their emotions, naming them may be triggering. Karla has created a roundabout emotional vocabulary list with *weasel words* (pgs. 201-202) to help you talk about emotions in a gentle way.

“If you can gently bring awareness (even weasel-ish awareness) to the actual emotion that's present, and if you can frame your observation as a question (or use the phrase *it seems*), you'll support people in beginning to develop their own Empathic Accuracy.”
(pg. 201)

Discussion: Do you have any weasel words or roundabout emotion words to add to this list?

Mom's Magical 3-Step Empathic Communication Skill

Karla's mother Billie Kara created this process to incorporate reflective listening into a more empathically developed process. It contains a number of boundary-respecting steps.

"When you share your information about what you see, be sure to protect the other person's dignity. If you say, 'I think I'm picking up this emotion. You tell me if it's true, then you place that person in a position of power as the final arbiter of what his or her emotional state is.'" (pg. 204)

Discussion: Are there times when you have been successfully present with someone as they processed their emotions and came up with their own answers?

When People Don't Agree with Your Empathic Impressions

Emotions can be uncomfortable subjects for some people, and they may find obvious empathy too exposing. The empathic approach to working with people who need a lot of space is to honor their needs and desires.

"The way I deal with people who don't want to be seen, and who don't want to be in any kind of empathic communication is to become very clear about my own emotional landscape so that I'm not projecting or leaking, because being seen and being vulnerable can make some people feel truly awful." (pg. 207)

Discussion: Have you ever seen into a person's situation even though they didn't want to be seen? Were you able to keep your impressions to yourself and give them their privacy?



Chapter 9

Empathic Mentoring, Empathic Parenting: *Nurturing and Supporting Empathy in Children*

Much of our empathic ability is developed during childhood. The interactions children have with their caregivers and others help them develop their empathic and emotional skills.

The Empathic Genius of Peek-a-Boo

We create many empathy games to help children learn emotions, though most of us don't realize that we're teaching specific skills; we play these games because they're fun! Peek-a-boo is an empathy game that also teaches Emotion Regulation.

"Without much spoken language, and without intentionally trying to create a teaching moment, Holly and her daughter have created a fully emotive and empathic interaction that's actually helping both of them learn to read each other and develop complex emotional and empathic skills." (pg.214)

Discussion: What other childhood games help children develop emotional and empathic awareness?

“Babies are interaction-based organisms, and they need to taste, feel, observe, hear, roll in, and experience the world emotionally, physically, and empathically. Babies’ bodies and brains are growing at a rapid pace, and they’re uploading as much information as they can possibly gather about everything. Babies’ fascination with peek-a-boo games is part of this intensely interactional uploading process – it’s emotional play and empathic learning focused on the exact skills babies need to develop.” (pg. 216)

Discussion: When you engage with babies, do you find yourself playing with your emotional expressions, or engaging in an empathic give-and-take? Think about your baby-relating behaviors in terms of emotional and empathic education: What are you teaching? What are you learning?

Teaching Children How to Self-Soothe

It’s very important for children to learn how to regulate their energy levels and their emotions. If you know what to look for, you’ll see children regulating themselves in many different ways.

“Self-soothing behaviors are crucial for Emotion Regulation and the eventual development of all other aspects of emotional skills, empathic skills, and social skills. If you can look at them developmentally, you’ll see that most of these behaviors are rhythmical and that many of them appear in connection to specific activities, emotions, or situations – thumb sucking in an unfamiliar environment, dancing in response to joy or anxiety, humming during intense concentration, spinning after returning from a noisy day at preschool, or floor pounding during angry outbursts.” (pgs. 220-221)

Discussion: What self-regulations and self-soothing skills have you observed in the children in your life? And what are your own self-soothing skills?

Empathic Mindfulness Skills for Children

Even very young children can benefit from simplified versions of the Empathic Mindfulness skills. Each of these skills is a self-soothing and self-regulation practice, and you can modify them to meet the understanding level and developmental needs of kids of all ages.

“You can teach children intentional forms of grounding and resourcing when they’re old enough to understand how to inhale deeply and exhale and let go of tension or how to find a place inside their bodies that’s very comfortable and strong right now. You can also help children learn to do some form of Conscious Complaining so that they can unload all of the emotional impressions they gather during the day. In toddlers, you can even create regular Intentional Tantrum games ... to help them learn to play-act, observe, experience, and develop humor about tantrums, which are a very important

(though aggravating!) part of children’s development of Emotion Regulation skills.” (pg. 224)

Discussion: One of the most supportive things you can do for children is to help them know that all emotions are okay and normal. As you think back to your own childhood, did you have someone who made you feel comfortable with your emotions?

Empathic Boys and Empathic Girls

Our gender socialization has many negative effects, not the least of which is to exile little boys from their emotional skills, and to exile little girls from their intellectual gifts.

“... gender roles are powerfully enforced and powerfully valenced – as we saw in the experiments I referred to in Chapter 2, where babies were treated completely differently depending on whether they were wearing *delicate* pink outfits or *dynamic* blue ones. Gender valencing is a fact of life, and it even influences whether girls will be encouraged to develop their math and science skills in school.” (pg. 228)

Discussion: What gender valencing did you experience as a child? What kind of gender valencing do you see kids dealing with today?

Working and Playing With Emotions in Children

Children love to play with, talk about, and think about emotions. You can support them simply by being available, and by being willing to talk about how emotions work.

“Helping children name their emotions, identify them, play with them, dramatically express them at many different intensities, and talk about them openly will help children develop comfort and expertise with the basic building blocks of their emotive, cognitive, empathic, and social skills. As you explore the actions that each emotion requires, and as you learn many different emotional vocabulary words, you’ll be able to approach emotional issues more empathically, share your new knowledge, and help children understand their emotions more clearly.” (pg. 231)

Discussion: If you or your group members have children at home, talk about ways that you can help children learn about and work with their own emotions.



Chapter 10

Empathy at Work: Excelling in the Art of Emotion Work

Many of us essentially live at work. We spend more time at work than at home, which means that our workplaces should be as comfortable and as emotionally healthy as they can be. Sadly, many workplaces aren’t comfortable or emotionally healthy. Many workplaces understand very

little about empathy and emotion work, and therefore don't support the important work that their employees do.

Revisiting Emotion Work

Emotion work is the work we do to manage our own emotions or the emotions of others so that we can get things done. This work is expected by and from everyone, but it's not spoken of openly.

“... even though we all *know* how everyone is supposed to behave, this knowledge is not made clear, and a great deal of the trouble I see in the workplace revolves around emotion work that either is not being performed (the *problem* employee) or is being performed but not valued (the put-upon or heading-for-burnout employee).” (pg. 249)

Discussion: What emotion work do you do in your job – and at home? And what emotion work do you expect from others? If this emotion work is strenuous or draining, are there any changes you could make to lighten the load?

Ethical Empathic Gossip

Gossip can be an important informal communication skill – as long as it's *ethical and empathic* gossip.

“Gossip has a purpose. It's necessary for social survival, and when it's very active, it's telling you there are injustices and inequities that need to be attended to. If you can follow the gossip threads and listen to the emotions, you'll discover key issues and crucial structural problems that many businesses hire high-priced efficiency experts to find.” (pg. 259)

Activity and Discussion and Exercise: Review the description of Ethical Empathic Gossip on pages 260-262 and practice this skill in your group. In workshops, we find that 8 to 10 minutes per person is needed, because gossip usually involves a lot of backstory. You need context to truly understand what's going on, and that takes some time!

If Your Work is Empathic in Nature

The Art of Empathy was created to help you develop and nurture your empathy in healthy and sustainable ways. If you're working in an empathic occupation, these skills are doubly or triply important for your continued health and well-being.

“As a working empath in our emotionally troubled world, you provide a vital and valuable service that can't be replicated. We can't digitize you or replace you with a machine, and we can't outsource your work to other countries. We need you here – happy, healthy, emotionally well fed, and well loved.” (pg. 263)

Discussion: Thank you for the empathic work and the emotion work that you do! If you've found a way to be comfortable as an emotion worker, share the supports you've found. We emotion workers have to stick together!

Creating an Emotionally Well-Regulated Workplace

Whether your work is empathic in nature or not, your workplace environment has a direct effect on your emotional health and well-being. If you're expected to perform a lot of emotion work that isn't supported (or noticed!), your working life may become very uncomfortable.

"There are literally thousands of books and programs that target the workplace in terms of how to make people into better workers and thereby increase productivity.

Empathically speaking, most of those books and programs fail (or get replaced in a number of months by the next miracle book or program) because they ignore emotion work and focus on the individual instead of the overriding power of workplace culture in driving behavior." (pg. 263)

Discussion: Review the seven ways to create an emotionally well-regulated workplace (pgs. 263-265) and share the things you've done (or seen) that create healthy and emotionally-supportive work environments.

When Your Workplace is Not Emotionally Well-Regulated

If your workplace isn't supportive, and there's nothing that can be done, you can use your skills to keep yourself well (or as well as you can be in an unhealthy social system).

"If you can't make enough changes to detoxify your workplace, and you can't currently move to a new job, I ask you to treat yourself as a working empath in a situation like this – and to take care of yourself as fully and with as much dedication as I suggested for professional empaths a few pages back. Emotion work is real work, and if your workplace can't support your real work, then you'll need to support yourself in as many ways as you can." (pg. 266)

Discussion: If you work in a job that is not emotionally or empathically aware and there is not much hope for change, what are some ways that you can protect yourself from empathy fatigue or burnout?



Chapter 11

Empathy for the World: *The Empathic Art of Social Justice*

Many highly empathic people are drawn to social justice work, so if you're looking for an empathic community, you'll find many friendships there. However, a great deal of burnout occurs in social justice communities, so it's important to care for yourself as conscientiously as you care for the world.

Protecting Yourself from Empathic Burnout

Many social justice organizations create marketing campaigns to manipulate your emotions and your empathy. This is something to keep an eye on, because too much emotional manipulation can lead to burnout and apathy.

“If you need people to do something they might not want to do or if you need them to learn something new, you have to figure out ways to compel or maneuver them – and the fastest way is through their emotions and their empathy. There are certainly more and less ethical ways to do this, but in and of itself, trying to evoke emotions in others is not a problem; it’s normal everyday behavior, and we all do it.” (pg. 269)

Discussion: In your own social justice work, do you have an intentional practice to keep yourself from burning out? Having read this book, are there any changes you would make in your approach to social justice work?

The Dark Side of Empathy

Our emotional and empathic skills give us the wonderful ability to feel compassion and form strong social ties; however, there’s a dark side. We can form social ties that are so strong that they exclude or even dehumanize people who don’t belong. We can confront this tendency, but it takes some work.

“Let’s intentionally and heroically work to develop empathy for ourselves and our loved ones, for people who are like us and people who aren’t, for people who deserve empathy and people who don’t. Then, to support the dramatic, groupish, swashbuckling, aggressive, war-loving, bullying, and enemy-addicted parts of our brains in nontoxic ways, we can have a daily round of tug of war, steal the flag, or pin the tail on the outcast. Yes!” (pg. 276)

Discussion: In the groups you belong to, do you see any areas of bias or “othering” of people who aren’t in the group? If so, would your group be amenable to changing their in-group behaviors?

Confronting these Stories and Changing the World

As you go forth with your newfound knowledge of emotions, empathy, and the dark side of empathy, remember that you are the creator of your own story.

“We can create stories that magically expand to include the alleged out-group. We can bring new and different emotions to the forefront. We can engage with our toxic groupishness through drama, mythology, literature, and ritualized forms of aggression, like tug of war, steal the flag, aikido, fencing, or kickboxing. And most important, we can learn how to form groups that don’t define themselves by whom they exclude. We can

tell new stories and begin, slowly but surely, to create a better and healthier empathic world for everyone.” (pg. 278)

Discussion: Talk about any stories, movies, books, or TV shows that teach people how to address toxic groupishness. How do they do that? What story-telling techniques do they use?



Epilogue

Envisioning an Empathic Civilization, Together

“Emotions and empathy are fundamental tools of human cognition, human interactions, and human culture; they make us who we are. We *are* an empathic species, but if we’re going to make a world worth living in, we have to become intentional empathists: emotionally awakened, well-regulated, healthy, happy, and perceptive empathists.” (pgs. 279-280)

Discussion: Knowing what you now know about empathy, what ideas do you have for supporting empathy in others, in your community, and in the world? How can we evolve as an empathic species? Thank you for considering these questions!

The End



Congratulations on completing *The Art of Empathy*!

If you’d like continue onward with your group, you can read Karla McLaren’s earlier book, *The Language of Emotions: What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You* (Sounds True, 2010). That free reading guide is available on *The Language of Emotions* page at KarlaMcLaren.com.

If you’re interested in learning more about emotions and empathy, Karla McLaren’s applied work is called **Dynamic Emotional Integration**[®] (or **DEI**). You can find licensed DEI Trainers and Consultants at EmotionDynamics.org.

Or if you’d like to find out more about taking online courses or becoming a licensed **DEI** Trainer or Consultant yourself, you can visit our online academy at EmpathyAcademy.org.



Thank you for bringing more empathy and emotional awareness to our waiting world!