Empathy Misses

Based on the research of *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown

The 8 emotions, behaviors, and empathic miscues that get in the way of connection.

Sympathy Versus Empathy

The person who responds with sympathy ("I feel so sorry for you") rather than empathy ("I get it, I feel with you, and I've been there"). The subtext of this response is distance: These things don't happen to me or people like me. If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: "Oh, you poor thing" or "Bless your heart."

Judgment

The person who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. The friend gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is an awkward silence. Then you have to make this person feel better by convincing them that you're not a terrible person.

Disappointment

The person who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. This person can't help you because they are too disappointed in your imperfections. You've let this person down.

Discharging Discomfort With Blame

Because shame is visceral and contagious, we can feel it for other people. This person immediately needs to discharge the discomfort and vulnerability of the situation by blaming and scolding. They may blame/scold you: "What were you thinking?" Or they may look for someone else to take the fall: "Who was that guy? We'll kick his butt." Caution: Parents can fall easily into this when a child shares a shaming story with them. "How did you let this happen?"

Minimize/Avoid

We minimize and avoid when we want hard feelings to go away. Out of their own discomfort, this person refuses to acknowledge that you're in pain and/or that you're hurting: "You're exaggerating. It wasn't that bad. You rock. You're perfect. Everyone loves you."

Comparing/ Competing

This person confuses connecting with you over shared experiences with the opportunity to one-up you. "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!"

Speaking Truth to Power

You hold someone accountable for language, comments, or behavior that marginalizes or dehumanizes others, and it causes discomfort or conflict. When this person observes this or hears your story of what happened, they respond with "I can't believe you said that to your boss!" or "I can't believe you went there!" or "You can't talk about that stuff with people" versus an empathic response of "That must have been hard—you were really brave" or "It's hard to stand up for what you believe in—thank you."

Advice Giving/ Problem Solving

Sometimes when we see pain our first instinct is to fix it. This is especially true for those of us whom people seek out to help with problem-solving. In these instances, rather than listen and be with people in their emotion, we start fixing.



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