



empathy & sympathy – what's the difference?

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Sympathy – explained simply, is a common way that we express our condolences to someone going through a difficult time. It usually sounds like this:

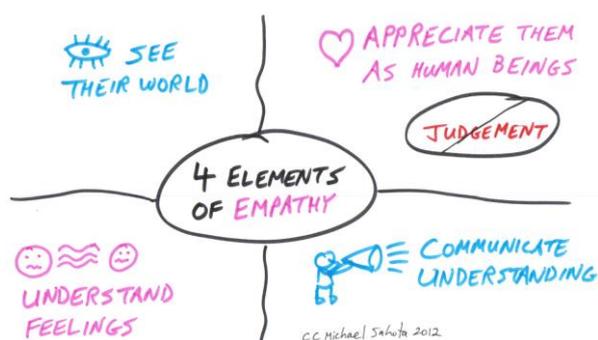
- “I’m sorry for your loss.”
- “I’m sorry to hear about that.”

Empathy – is quite different to sympathy. There is no set expression of words for empathy. It requires more from us than just a statement of condolence.

Empathy always begins with good listening – I listen with the aim of understanding what this loss means to you and how you feel about it. I invite you tell me your story – I listen without judgement, without interruption and without telling you about a similar story of my own.

I do not listen with the aim of:

- Fixing your grief
- Cheering you up
- Moving you on
- Getting your mind off it
- Snapping you out of it
- Stopping you from crying
- Showing you that others are worse off



When I respond with empathy, my words will show you that I have heard your message, I accept that's how you feel, I'm on your wave length, I hear what matters to you. You will notice that I'm not put off by your tears, I'm not trying to tell you how to do your grieving. On the contrary, I give you permission to have your grief, I'm not frightened by your anger, fear, anxiety, guilt, loneliness instead I try to understand it. And so I respond like this:

- It sounds like you're feeling really ...
- I can see how much that's hurt you.
- I can understand why you're so upset. He/she meant the world to you.
- You're really lost without him/her. Life's just not the same anymore for you.
- You're feeling so empty inside.
- Your life's been turns upside down.
- Your head's full of questions and nothing seems to make any sense.
- You sound like you want to turn the clock back and say...
- It's hard to understand why the world keeps turning when your own life seems to have stopped.
- Seems like you're really struggling with this... the blame and the guilt ...

Doris Zagdanski is a leading figure in modern day grief and loss education. Her seminars are included in vocational qualifications in Allied Health, Counselling and Funeral Directing. Her books and free factsheets are available at www.allaboutgrief.com



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Empathy is walking a mile in somebody else's moccasins. Sympathy is being sorry their feet hurt.



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