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BUILDING BRIDGES

Pathways towards
Empathy and Connection

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TOOLKIT

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A COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY

This toolkit was born from the Erasmus+ Training Course *Building Bridges: Pathways towards Empathy and Connection* – a shared journey shaped by passion, expertise, and a deep commitment to youth empowerment.

It was co-created under the guidance of:

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The project was made possible through the collaboration of dedicated partner organizations from across Europe, each contributing their unique expertise and local perspective:

Mudita Foundation, Poland – Project Coordinator

P.E.CO Progetti Europei di Cooperazione, Italy

Associação Nacional de Estudantes de Psicologia, Portugal

IZUM Youth Club, Estonia

Mission: Reconnect, Czechia

Asociación Promesas, Spain

Fantazmagorija, The Republic of North Macedonia

KALM International Trainings, Latvia

At the heart of this toolkit are the voices of the youth workers who participated in the *Building Bridges* Training Course. Representing diverse backgrounds and countries, they brought empathy, creativity, and lived experience to every activity and idea. They tested, refined, and co-created tools designed to foster meaningful youth engagement – and their spirit is woven into every page.

WHY CONNECTION MATTERS

No matter what we teach or how we show up in young people's lives – mentor, educator, guide – everything flows more naturally when there's a genuine connection. That connection is the key. It helps us understand their world, their struggles, and their dreams. It opens the door to more meaningful learning, deeper trust, and lasting growth.

We're not just sharing knowledge – we're building bridges to their hearts. When young people feel safe in our presence, they begin to trust. And when they trust, they thrive.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY

One of the most powerful tools for building this connection is empathy. This toolkit invites youth workers to explore empathy from the inside out. It offers practical, engaging activities designed to help young people strengthen their empathic skills – and to help us meet them with greater understanding, compassion, and care.



UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

Empathy has many definitions. As researchers often note, it's not easy to pin down – “Put ten empathy experts in a room and you'll get ten different definitions.” This quote, shared widely in empathy circles, reflects just how rich and complex the concept truly is.

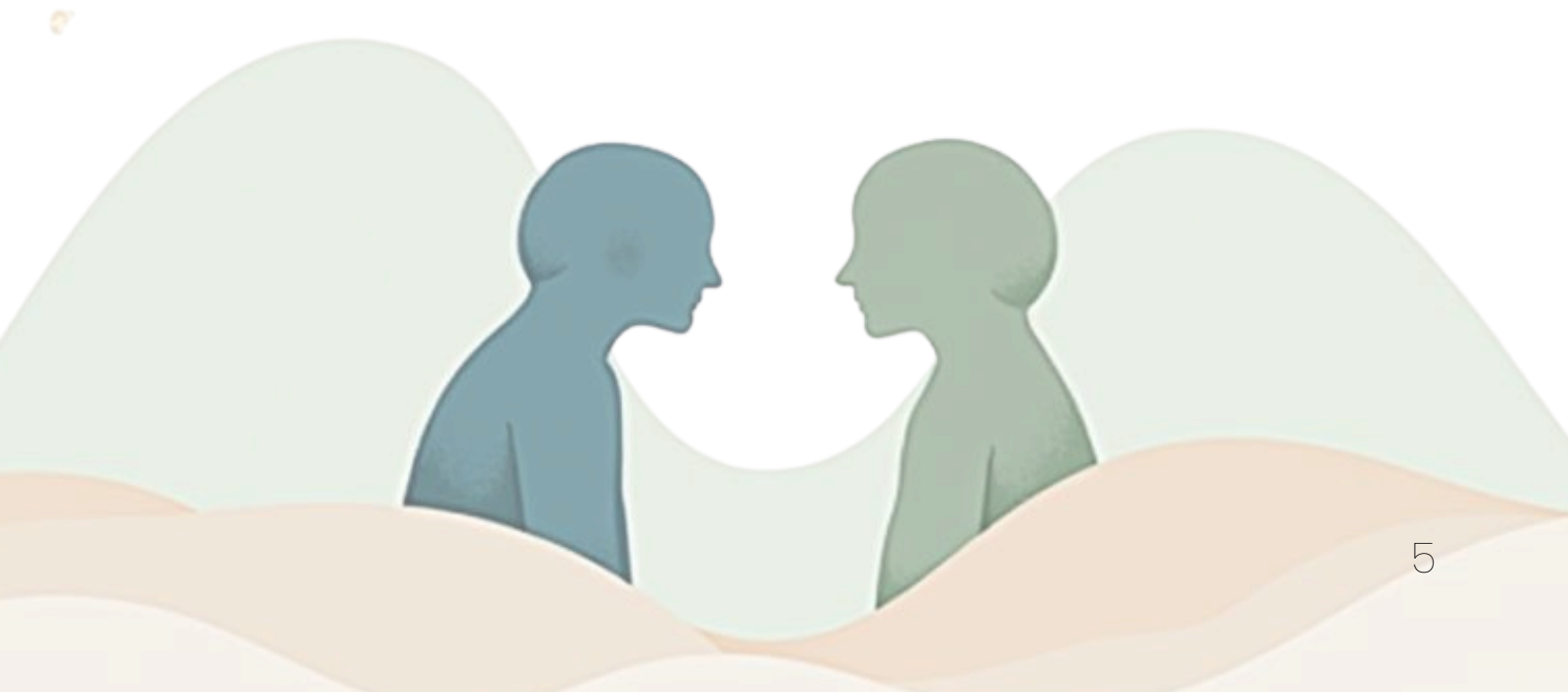
At its heart, empathy is about **genuine connection**. It's about being present with someone – in the same space and moment – and tuning into their experience. And while definitions may vary, most scientists agree that empathy can be understood through **three main dimensions**:

Affective empathy is the emotional side. It's when we feel what someone else is feeling. Like when a friend is heartbroken and you feel that ache in your own chest. It's the instinctive emotional resonance that draws us closer.

Cognitive empathy is about understanding. It's the ability to imagine what someone else is going through, even if we haven't lived it ourselves. It's mentally stepping into their shoes and saying: “I get it. I see you.”

Behavioral empathy is empathy in action. It's how we respond – with kindness, patience, and support. It's the way we show up, offer help, or simply sit beside someone in silence when words aren't enough.

Empathy doesn't mean fixing someone's problems. It means **being with them** in their experience. And when we practice all three – feeling, understanding, and responding – we create space for real connection, healing, and growth.



DEFINITIONS OF EMPATHY THAT INSPIRED THIS TOOLKIT

Empathy is a multifaceted concept, shaped by diverse disciplines and practices. The following definitions – drawn from the leading voices in communication, neuroscience, and embodiment – have deeply influenced the creation of this toolkit

MARSHALL ROSENBERG

According to Marshall Rosenberg, the creator of Nonviolent Communication, empathy means being **fully present** with another person – listening without judgment, interruption, or the urge to fix. It's about holding space for their emotions and tuning into the deeper **feelings** and universal **needs** behind their words, such as safety, belonging, or respect.

“Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing.”

Marshall Rosenberg

DANIEL J. SIEGEL

Daniel Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry who developed **Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB)** – a multidisciplinary framework exploring how relationships and the brain shape each other – describes empathy as a dynamic blend of **emotional resonance**, **cognitive understanding**, and **responsive action**. It begins with **attunement** – tuning into another person's inner world so they feel truly “felt”.

“Empathy is the capacity to understand the internal experiences of another and to communicate that understanding.”

Daniel J. Siegel

MARK WALSH

Mark Walsh, founder of Embodiment Unlimited and a leading voice in the embodiment field, defines **embodied empathy** as the ability to connect with and respond to others through **physical presence and awareness** – not just through thoughts or emotions. It means being grounded in your own body, attuning to subtle cues such as posture, breath, and movement, and using the body as a tool for authentic connection and communication.

“When empathy is embodied, we don't just hear words, we sense presence, breath, posture, movement; we connect in a way that transcends mere ideas.”

Mark Walsh

UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY ON A NEUROBIOLOGICAL LEVEL

HAND MODEL OF THE BRAIN – INSPIRED BY DR. DANIEL SIEGEL

Dr. Daniel Siegel developed the **Hand Model of the Brain** as a simple, visual tool to help people – especially children and teens – understand how their brain works, particularly during moments of stress or emotional overwhelm. By using your hand as a metaphor, you can demonstrate how different parts of the brain interact – especially the **prefrontal cortex** (thinking brain) and the **amygdala** (feeling brain).

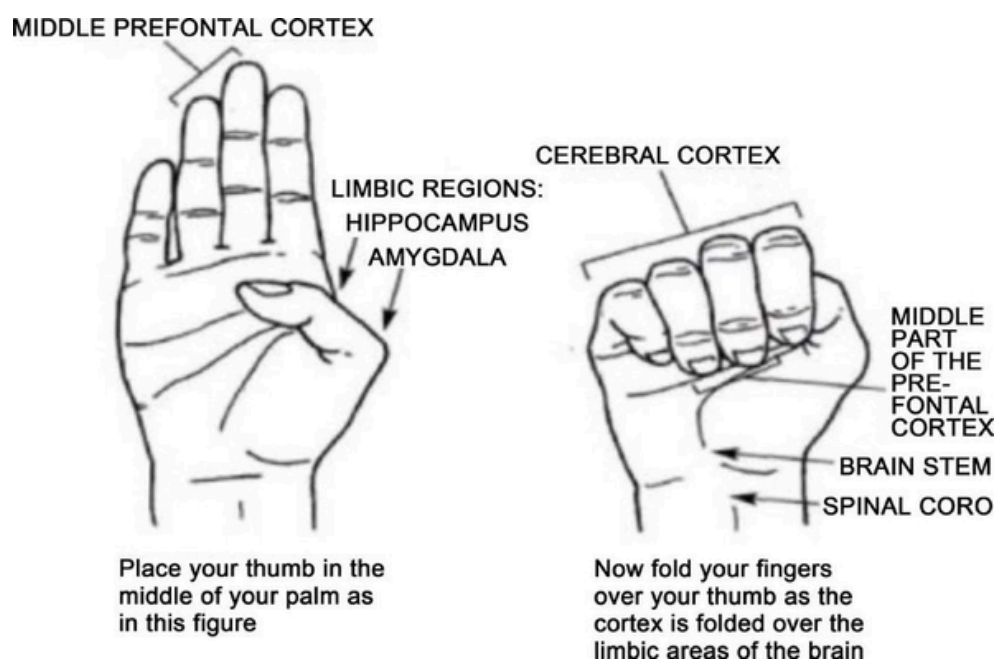
- **Wrist & palm** → Brainstem: Controls breathing, heartbeat, and survival instincts
- **Thumb (tucked in)** → Limbic System / Amygdala: Handles emotions like fear, anger, and anxiety
- **Fingers** (folded over thumb) → Prefrontal Cortex: Responsible for thinking, empathy, and self-control

When your fingers are folded down, all parts of the brain are connected – meaning you can feel emotions, think clearly, and relate to others with empathy.

When you “flip your lid” (fingers lift up), the connection between the emotional and thinking parts of the brain breaks. Knowing this helps us respond with compassion instead of judgment.

Teaching Tips

- Teach youth the hand model using their own hands.
- Discuss what it feels like to “flip your lid”.
- Practice calming strategies to “close the lid”, such as: breathing, touch, movement or walking



[VIDEO with instructions](#)

EMPATHY IN NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC)

INSPIRED BY THE WORK OF MARSHALL ROSENBERG

Nonviolent Communication, developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, is a process that fosters empathy, connection, and compassionate dialogue. In NVC, empathy means being fully present with another person – listening without judgment, interruption, or the urge to fix. It's about tuning into the deeper feelings and universal human needs behind their words.

Empathy in NVC is not about agreeing or offering advice. It's about creating space for someone to feel heard, understood, and emotionally safe.

THE FOUR STEPS OF NVC

Step 1) Observations ≠ Judgements

- Facts describing what has happened, what someone did or said
- Seeing the things as they are – video camera
- Quotation

VERSUS

- Thoughts, judgments about the situation or a person
- Labelling, interpretations, analyzing, etc.
- Deciding who is right, what should/shouldn't be done, who should we blame.

Step 2) Feelings ≠ Thoughts

- Feelings name how we are and which emotions we experience
- Sensations coming from our bodies
- Delighted, frustrated, annoyed, calm, etc.

VERSUS

- Thoughts/false feelings: do not describe authentic feelings, but what we think other people do to us, for example:
 - "I feel ignored/manipulated" (you ignore me)
 - words that describe our thoughts, interpretations, judgements and projections, e.g. "I feel that... nobody cares about me" or "I feel as if...", etc.

Step 3) Needs ≠ Strategies

- The inner energy that “drives” us
- Needs are universal (everyone on Earth has the same needs) and everything we do is to fulfil our needs. When we name the needs we can understand what lies behind someone’s actions.
- There is no concrete person or action attached to it

VERSUS

- Concrete actions undertaken to fulfill our needs (indicating when, how and who can do what).

Step 4) Requests ≠ Demands

- Clear and concrete (stating what, who, where, when and how)
- Doable
- Expressed in the present time
- Formulated in a positive language (what we want instead of what we do not want)
- Assuming the possibility of a “No” (When people hear demands, they usually have two choices: obey or rebel)

VERSUS

- Using guilt and shame-inducing language, to achieve one's goal
- Suggesting that there is no choice.

Human beings enjoy giving when they have a free choice



BONUS:

WEBINAR ON EMPATHY IN NVC

WEBINAR ON CONFLICTS WITH NVC

UNDERSTANDING EMBODIED EMPATHY

INSPIRED BY THE WORK OF MARK WALSH

Embodied empathy is the ability to connect with others not just through thoughts or emotions, but through **physical presence** and awareness. It means being attuned to your own body so you can sense and respond to the emotional states of others – using posture, breath, movement, and energy as tools for connection.

Why Embodiment Matters

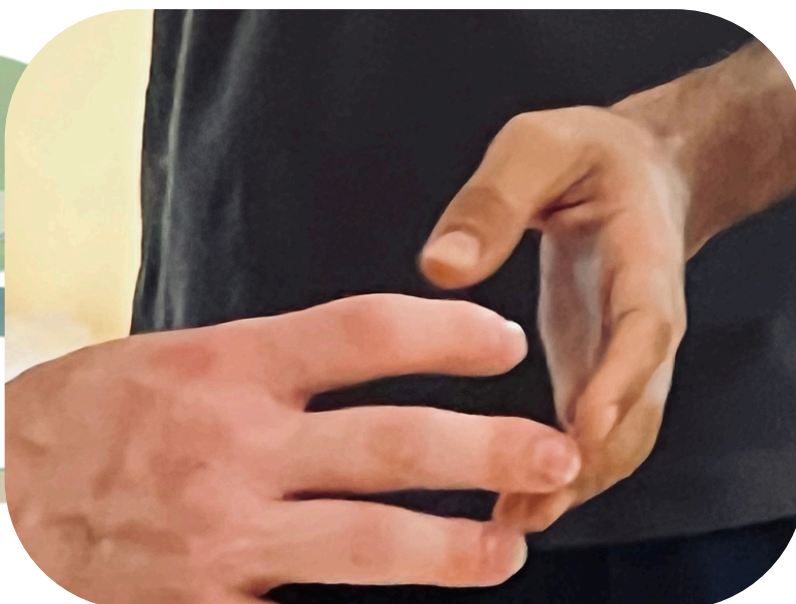
- Emotions live in the body – tight chest, butterflies, clenched fists
- Empathy grows when we notice and respond to these signals
- Movement and posture can help regulate emotions and build connection.

Core Elements of Embodied Empathy

- **Self-awareness** – Noticing your own bodily sensations, tension, breath, and posture
- **Attunement** – Sensing subtle cues in others (e.g., facial expressions, body language, energy shifts)
- **Regulation** – Staying grounded and calm so you can co-regulate with others
- **Presence** – Offering your full attention through your body, not just your words.

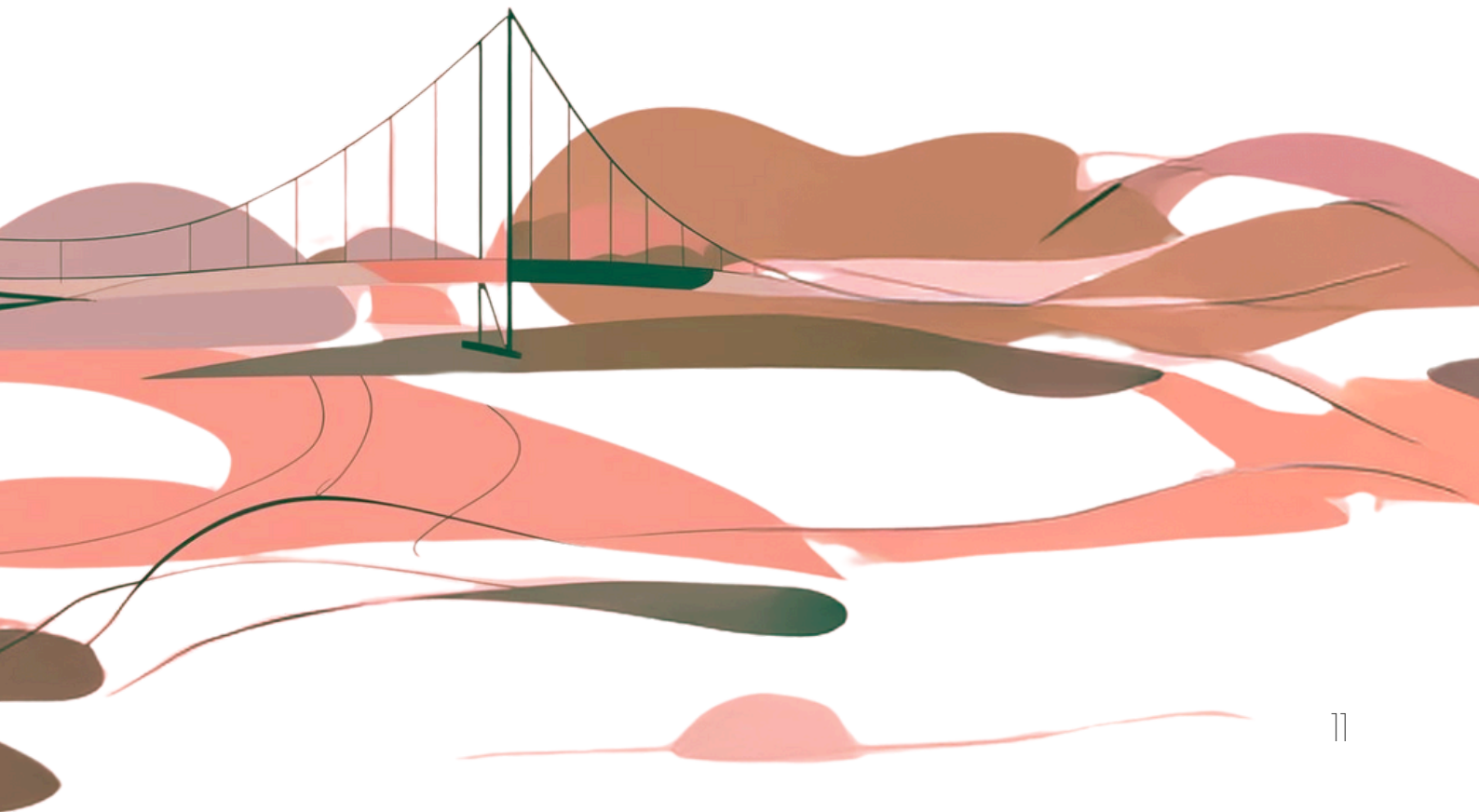
Embodied Empathy in Practice

- Slow down and notice your breath and posture before engaging
- Mirror someone's body language gently to build rapport
- Use grounding techniques (e.g., feet on the floor, relaxed shoulders) to stay present
- Respond with gestures, tone, and movement that reflect care and understanding.



ACTIVITIES

EMBODIED EMPATHY TOOLKIT FOR YOUTH WORKERS



1. EMPATHY WALK

Purpose: Practice deep listening and full-body presence in motion.

Instructions:

1. Pair up participants and invite them to walk side by side at a relaxed pace.
2. One person shares a personal story or experience while walking.
3. The listener focuses on being fully present - using open body language, occasional glances, and affirming gestures like nodding or gentle verbal cues (e.g., "I hear you").
4. After 3-5 minutes, switch roles.
5. After both have shared, gather the group for a short reflection.

Debrief Questions:

- How did it feel to be fully listened to while walking?
- What did you notice in your body while listening?
- Did walking change how you shared or received the story?

Materials Needed: None

Time: 10-15 minutes



2. MIRROR MOVEMENT

Purpose: Build trust, nonverbal sensitivity, and attunement.

Instructions:

1. Pair up participants and stand facing each other in a quiet space with room to move.
2. One person begins leading slow, intentional movements – using hands, arms, posture, or facial expressions.
3. The other person mirrors the movements as closely and smoothly as possible.
4. After 2–3 minutes, switch roles.
5. Invite the group to reflect together.

Debrief Questions:

- What did you notice in your body while mirroring?
- Was it easier to lead or follow?
- Did you feel connected to your partner?

Materials Needed: None

Time: 5–10 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Encourage slow, fluid movements and emphasize curiosity over precision.



3. EMOTION SCULPTING



Purpose: Develop emotional literacy and body awareness.

Instructions:

1. Ask participants to choose an emotion (e.g., joy, anger, sadness, empathy).
2. Using only their body – without words – they “sculpt” or express that emotion through posture, gesture, and facial expression.
3. The rest of the group observes and guesses which emotion is being portrayed.
4. Facilitate a short discussion: What cues helped them recognize the emotion? How did it feel to embody it?
5. Rotate through different emotions and participants.

Debrief Questions:

- What did it feel like to embody that emotion?
- What helped you recognize other people’s emotions?
- Did any emotions feel easier or harder to express?

Materials Needed: None

Time: 10–15 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Normalize all emotional expressions and invite laughter or curiosity when emotions feel awkward or unfamiliar.

4. BODY CHECK-IN RITUAL



Purpose: Build self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Instructions:

1. Begin each session with a short pause (1–5 minutes).
2. Guide participants through:
 - a. Noticing their breath.
 - b. Scanning their body for tension, energy, or comfort.
 - c. Trying to name any emotions or sensations they feel.
3. Invite optional sharing or journaling.

Debrief Questions (optional):

- What did you notice in your body?
- Did anything shift during the check-in?
- How might this help you stay grounded today?

Materials Needed: None

Time: 2–5 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Keep the tone gentle and nonjudgmental. This is about noticing, not fixing.

5. FEELINGS & NEEDS CARD SORT

Purpose: Build vocabulary around emotions and needs; foster self-awareness.

Instructions:

1. Provide participants with a set of feeling and needs cards.
2. Ask participants to choose:
 - a. A feeling they've experienced recently.
 - b. A need that was met or unmet in that moment.
3. Invite sharing in pairs or small groups.

Debrief Questions:

- Was it easy or hard to name your feeling?
- What helped you identify your need?
- How might this help in a conflict?

Materials Needed: Printed cards or lists of feelings and needs

Time: 10–15 minutes

Deck of Feelings and Needs Cards

Deck of Feelings and Needs Cards – Artistic Version



6. OBSERVATION VS. EVALUATION

Purpose: Practice separating facts from judgments.

Instructions:

1. Share examples of statements (e.g., “You’re always late!” vs. “You arrived 15 minutes after our agreed time”).
2. In pairs or small groups, participants rewrite judgmental statements as neutral observations.
3. Discuss how tone and clarity shift.

Debrief Questions:

- How did the revised statements feel different?
- Why is it important to separate observation from evaluation?

Materials Needed: Sample statements (printed or verbal)

Time: 10–20 minutes



7. EMPATHY CIRCLE

Purpose: Practice listening without fixing, judging, or interrupting.

Instructions:

1. Form small circles (3–5 people).
2. One person shares a challenge or emotion.
3. The next person reflects back what they heard (e.g., “It sounds like you felt overwhelmed when...”).
4. No advice or problem-solving – just reflection and empathy.
5. Rotate roles.

Debrief Questions:

- What was it like to be heard without advice?
- What did you notice in yourself while listening?

Materials Needed: None

Time: 15–20 minutes



8. NEEDS MAPPING



Purpose: Explore the universal human needs behind behaviors.

Instructions:

1. Present a scenario (e.g., someone yelling in frustration).
2. Ask: "What might this person be needing?"
3. Use a whiteboard or paper to map out possible unmet needs (e.g., respect, autonomy, support).
4. Repeat with different scenarios.

Debrief Questions:

- Did this change how you viewed the behavior?
- How might this help in real-life conflicts?

Materials Needed: Whiteboard or paper

Time: 15–20 minutes

LIST OF FEELINGS AND NEEDS

9. IMAGE THEATRE: OBSERVATION VS. INTERPRETATION

Purpose: Practice distinguishing between neutral observation and personal interpretation using embodied storytelling.

Instructions

1. Invite small groups to create frozen images (tableaux) using their bodies to represent a moment of tension, emotion, or conflict.
2. Ask other participants to observe each image silently and note:
 - a. One **observation** (what they see).
 - b. One **interpretation** (what they think is happening).
3. Facilitate a group discussion to compare observations and interpretations.

Debrief Questions:

- Was it easy or hard to separate observation from interpretation?
- What surprised you about other people's interpretations?
- How might this awareness help in real-life communication or conflict?

Materials Needed: Open space for movement, optional paper and pens

Time: 30–45 minutes



10. WALK IN MY SHOES



Purpose: Build perspective-taking and compassion through role-play and empathetic response.

Instructions

1. Prepare scenario cards with brief life situations (e.g., “You’re new at school,” “Caring for a sick parent,” “You forgot your homework again”).
2. Each participant randomly selects a card and role-plays the scenario.
3. Others respond using active listening and NVC principles – reflecting feelings, identifying needs, and offering empathy without judgment or advice.
4. Facilitate a group reflection after several rounds.

Debrief Questions:

- What did it feel like to be in that role?
- What helped you feel understood?
- What assumptions did you notice – about yourself or others?

Materials Needed: Scenario cards, empathy reflection sheets

Time: 20–30 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Encourage participants to stay curious and open-hearted. Remind them that empathy is about connection, not fixing.

11. EMPATHY MAP



Purpose: Explore emotional awareness and perspective-taking by mapping thoughts, feelings, words, and actions.

Instructions:

1. Draw a large cross on paper or use a printed template to create four quadrants labeled:
 - a. Thinks
 - b. Feels
 - c. Says
 - d. Does
2. Choose a character (from a story, film, or real life) and fill in each quadrant based on what they might be experiencing.
3. Encourage participants to consider both visible behaviors and internal experiences.
4. Use color or symbols to highlight emotions and needs.

Debrief Questions:

- What emotions might be behind their actions?
- What needs could they be trying to meet?
- How does this map help you understand them more deeply?

Materials Needed: Printable templates

Time: 30–45 minutes

12. STORY SWAP

Purpose: Practice active listening and build trust through storytelling and perspective-taking.

Instructions:

1. Pair up participants and invite each person to share a short personal story (2–3 minutes).
2. After listening, the partner retells the story as if it were their own – using first-person language and emotional tone.
3. Encourage participants to focus on capturing the essence, feelings, and key details of the story.
4. After both have shared and swapped, gather the group for reflection.

Debrief Questions:

- How did it feel to hear your story told back?
- What did you learn about listening and empathy?
- What surprised you about how your story was interpreted?

Materials Needed: Timer, optional story prompt cards

Time: 15–25 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Remind participants that the goal is not perfect recall, but emotional resonance and respectful retelling.



13. EMPATHY POKER



Purpose: Strengthen nonverbal empathy and emotional literacy by identifying feelings and needs without judgment or advice.

Instructions:

1. One participant describes a real or imagined situation – something emotionally charged, challenging, or meaningful.
2. The listener uses NVC Feelings & Needs cards to identify what emotions and needs might be present in the speaker's experience.
3. No advice, fixing, or problem-solving – just quiet reflection and card selection.
4. Afterward, the listener shares the cards they chose and explains why.
5. Repeat with role reversal or in small groups.

Debrief Questions:

- What feelings did you hear?
- What needs might be unmet or met?
- How did it feel to be heard without receiving advice?

Materials Needed: NVC Feelings & Needs cards ([link to cards and needs inventory](#))

Time: 15–25 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Emphasize that empathy is about connection, not correction. Invite participants to trust their intuition when choosing cards.

Deck of Feelings and Needs Cards

14. CIRCLE OF HIDDEN STORIES

Purpose: Understand empathy through shared emotional experiences and perspective-taking.

Instructions:

1. Invite each participant to write a short personal memory or emotional moment anonymously - no names or identifying details.
2. Collect and shuffle the papers, then redistribute randomly.
3. Each person reads aloud the story they received, speaking as if it were their own.
4. After all stories are shared, reveal the original authors and discuss the experience together.

Debrief Questions:

- Were the imagined feelings similar to the real ones?
- What did this teach you about empathy and emotional connection?
- How did it feel to hear your story told by someone else?

Materials Needed: Blank paper, pens, chairs arranged in a circle, optional soft background music

Time: 20–30 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Encourage a calm, respectful atmosphere. Remind participants that every story deserves care, even if it's not their own.



15. THE WEB OF CONNECTION

Purpose: Build empathy and collaboration through nonverbal teamwork and shared focus.

Instructions:

1. Invite participants to stand in a circle and briefly introduce themselves.
2. Begin by tossing a ball of yarn across the circle, holding onto the end before passing — continue until everyone is connected, creating a visible web that symbolizes connection and teamwork.
3. Once the web is formed, place two upright cups in the center of the circle. Carefully tie or balance a pen in the middle of the yarn web so that it hangs suspended above the cups.
4. Present the group with a silent challenge: without speaking, work together to lower the pen into both cups.
5. This requires adjusting the tension and movement of the yarn together – communication through awareness, eye contact, and subtle coordination.
6. After the task, invite a short reflection.

Debrief Questions:

- How did it feel to communicate without words?
- What helped you stay connected to the group?
- What did this teach you about empathy and cooperation?

Materials Needed: Ball of yarn

Time: 30 – 45 minutes





16. MIRROR & BRIDGE

Purpose: Explore empathy through emotional contrast and shared reflection.

Instructions:

1. Present participants with pairs of contrasting emotional statements (e.g., “I feel confident in groups” vs. “I feel anxious in groups”).
2. Ask participants to choose the statement that resonates most with them and form groups accordingly.
3. Begin with cross-group dialogue: each group shares their experiences with the opposite group, listening for understanding.
4. Then shift to same-group dialogue: participants reflect on shared experiences within their chosen group.
5. Facilitate a whole-group reflection to explore insights and emotional bridges

Debrief Questions:

- What surprised you in the opposite group’s experience?
- Did you feel more empathy after hearing their stories?
- What helped you connect across differences?

Materials Needed: Sample statements (printed or verbal)

Time: 20–30 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Choose emotionally resonant but accessible statements. Encourage curiosity and respect during cross-group sharing.

17. WALKING IN THEIR SHOES

Purpose: Practice embodied empathy through movement and nonverbal attunement.

Instructions:

1. Pair up participants and ask one person in each pair to walk in a way that shows how they feel today.
2. The other person follows silently, focusing on mirroring the leader's pace, rhythm, and energy.
3. After a few minutes, switch roles.
4. Repeat with a new partner to explore different movement styles and emotional tones.
5. Invite individual reflection followed by a group discussion.

Debrief Questions:

- What did you notice in your body while leading or following?
- How did it feel to be fully focused on another person's movement?
- What did you discover about empathy through physical connection?

Materials Needed: Open space

Time: 15–25 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Encourage slow, mindful movement and remind participants that empathy can be felt through subtle shifts and shared rhythm.



18. EMBODIED LISTENING

Purpose: Cultivate embodied presence and empathy through silent witnessing and mindful sharing.

Instructions:

1. In pairs, one person stands or sits and slowly shares what they notice in their body:
 - a. starting with sensations (e.g., “I feel warmth in my chest,” “My shoulders are tight”)
 - b. then moving into feelings (e.g., “I feel calm,” “I feel nervous”). The other person simply witnesses – no speaking, no reacting, just full presence.
2. After a few minutes, switch roles.
3. Invite participants to reflect individually and then share in the group.

Debrief Questions:

- What did you notice in your body while being witnessed?
- How did it feel to witness without responding?
- What did this teach you about presence and empathy?

Materials Needed: Open space, optional cushions or chairs

Time: 15–25 minutes

Facilitator Tip: Remind participants that witnessing is an active practice – being fully present without fixing, judging, or interrupting.





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