What We Talk About When We Talk About Empathy:

The Power and Limitations of Empathy in the Battle for Justice
“We are experiencing an unprecedented national attack on empathy. In D.C., we have the least empathetic human among our 315 million citizens. That trickles down.”

— Dave Eggers

Robert Shelton, reproduced in Neel Burton, M.D., “Empathy vs. Sympathy,”
last visited April 30 2019.
Types of Empathy:

- Affective, or actual mirroring of others’ feelings
- Cognitive, sometimes called “perspective-taking,” or the ability to predict others’ emotional responses
- Compassionate, triggering additional conduct to alleviate stress or suffering

Possible Limitations on Empathy:

- Affective empathy inherently reflects bias in favor of those like ourselves
- Affective empathy focuses our attention disproportionately on the plight of particular individuals at the expense of larger groups

Empathic accuracy can be learned. How should it be taught??

- Experiential learning, risk-taking?
- Environment of psychological safety and trust
  - Attunement ("informed empathy")
  - Authenticity
  - Power-sharing

Some mindfulness practices include:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<td>Active listening/mirroring of statements</td>
<td>promote better communication without assumptions</td>
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<td>Role-playing and reflection</td>
<td>increase awareness of effects on others and similarities/differences among individuals</td>
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<td>Self-awareness scan</td>
<td>identify responses at moments of stress (delivery or receipt of bad news)</td>
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<td>Awareness and reservation of judgment</td>
<td>Naming of emotions, categorization (with openness, flexibility, multiplicity)</td>
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<td>Identification of values</td>
<td>bolster shared values and counteract stereotype threat</td>
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Some reflective exercises can include:

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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Task</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self-awareness of pleasant or unpleasant feelings or thoughts</td>
<td>Write about/discuss an instance in which you became aware of such feelings/thoughts and about their effect on a communication with a client or decisionmaker</td>
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<td>Implicit bias/preconceived idea</td>
<td>Write about/discuss a client encounter, goal, or response that surprised you</td>
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<td>Bolstering values</td>
<td>Write about/discuss a meaningful encounter and describe your own personal contribution (what characteristics) to the outcome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>Write/about discuss a conflict that raised unpleasant feelings or thoughts but resolved positively</td>
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Table adapted from Krasner MS, Epstein RM, Beckman H, Suchman AL, Chapman B, Mooney CJ, Quill TE. Association of an Educational Program in Mindful Communication With Burnout, Empathy, and Attitudes Among Primary Care Physicians. JAMA. 2009;302(12):1284-1293.
2-Way Empathy Mapping?

- Pains
- Gains
- Goals
- Interests

Says

Does

Thinks

Feels