

## Practicing Empathy

Dr. Helen Riess recently published a study on empathy training in healthcare. The basic premise: “Physician empathy is an essential attribute of the patient–physician relationship and is associated with better outcomes, greater patient safety and fewer malpractice claims.” Her research supports the idea that not only is empathy important, it can actually be taught to resident physicians in a relatively short period of time — in this case it was three 60-minute sessions that focused primarily on the neuroscience of empathy.

So, with a little understanding and some scientific data to back it up, even overworked medical professionals seeing dozens of patients every day can be taught to relate better to the emotions of others. So what does this have to do with the rest of us?

Being in a service business, we are all too familiar with anxious clients making what seem like irrational demands. A normal reaction to this kind of behavior might be defiance, resignation or exasperation. Not exactly the kind of emotions that drive professional excellence. Over my 20-ish years in the agency business, I have learned that the first step to success is to try to put ourselves in the other person’s shoes. The focus here is not just to stop feeling bad for ourselves and simply start feeling bad for him or her — that is mere sympathy and it won’t take you far enough. The point is to actually be him or her. Empathy means moving into their world emotionally and feeling it. This can often be accomplished by asking some very direct questions – on the phone or in-person. (Sorry, no email, texting or IM’s.)

### Establishing Empathy: 4 Key Questions

What are you worried about right this minute?

What can we get done in the next few hours that will help alleviate that worry?

What are our biggest obstacles?

How can we overcome them?

Note that the questions gradually move from first and second-person to third person. By the time you get to the end of the conversation, you should have established a mutual goal and made the person feel

your support as a member of their team. Once we can establish a position of empathy, we are working with a much different set of emotions – granted, they may not necessarily be positive emotions, but they are usually the dynamic emotions most likely to inspire action rather than passive emotions that just make us feel bad. So, rather than think about what someone is doing to you, you can start focusing on what you can do for them. Stop feeling like a victim and your problem-solving skills will take over.

What's more, if a truly empathetic approach is effectively communicated, it can have a very calming effect on the person you are empathizing with. Like the patients who experienced more positive outcomes in Dr. Riess' study, when people are feeling understood, they are much less likely to harangue, harass and make unreasonable demands. Empathy is an enormously empowering approach to even the most difficult situations.

Dr. Riess has founded an e-learning company called Empathetics. The initial product offering is to physicians, but the possibilities seem limitless. Let's hope there's an upcoming module for us garden-variety service professionals up against the occasional bad day.