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## *Non - Awkward Ways* **To Show Empathy:** *Being an Emotionally Safe Place*

By Janel Breitenstein

There's transformative power in intimate, soul-baring community.

But as you already know, this kind of connectedness doesn't just happen. It's created.

It takes tenacious trust and courage, vulnerability and safety. But who doesn't want their relationships to be an emotionally safe place? A soul-home on earth?

It's one of the ways we express Jesus to a weary world: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). It's one way we glimpse a God who restores our souls (Psalm 23:3).

So start here.



## 1 Nix the defensiveness.

Being an emotionally safe place says, *I can stay open to what you have to say.*

This doesn't mean you have to agree; true care looks like boundaries. But it does mean taking ownership for what is yours—the log in your eye, so to speak.

And it means hearing what someone is saying rather than getting hung up on the mental static of *how* it's said.



## 2 Get honest about your own junk.

Judgment begets judgment. If we sense someone is critical, especially without graciousness, we want to be critical right back.

But vulnerability begets vulnerability. You probably already know which friends you'd feel comfortable with if they knocked on your front door and the place was a mess or you were sporting your PJs. It's probably those who show they're cool not having it all together—by being their messy selves.



## 3 Get rid of pat answers.

Sadly, it's the misplaced Bible verses and trite Christian sayings poking out like a hangnail when we're processing grief, leaving us a little rawer, a little more inflamed. (“It was God’s will.” “God works all things together for good.” “God helps those who help themselves.”)

The offense of platitudes can lie in what they're truly communicating: *Your problem is plug-and-play. I will choose something used for someone else's problem and apply it to yours.*

Read: *You are a problem to be solved. I didn't hear your heart and what you truly needed, and I didn't necessarily "see" you. But I would like to fix it.*

So often, when we're sharing our hearts—that holy ground—we are looking for someone to simply bear a burden too leaden and misshapen for our own shoulders.

Galatians chimes in here: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2).

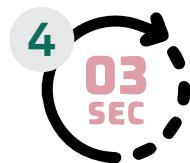
Burden-bearing is messy and self-sacrificial and involved. And decidedly un-formulaic.

As Christians and humans, we long for answers for some of the baffling, soul-rattling circumstances God allows. We flail about for answers that fail to encompass the horror before us.

Sometimes we're hasty to set aside the ambiguity we loathe—including ambiguity about God's character.

But Jesus knew every truth as the dirt of Gethsemane ground into His knees. He knew God had a plan, knew God would resurrect Him. But He needed to grieve, cry out, and commune with God in abject pain.

More than leaping to a resurrection, a safe person stops and absorbs some of the weight.



**Wait at least three seconds before responding.**

Rather than rushing in with encouragement or response, push open a window for the person across from you to say more.

It's beautiful what people will say in silence—space we might have filled with something way less valuable than what's on the person's mind.

Be an emotionally safe place by being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19).

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## Create white space in your calendar.

The right to be welcomed into someone's most vulnerable concerns is *earned* through quality time. Small talk. Meaningful gestures when times are hard. Your own vulnerability.

Intimacy and presence aren't turned on and off like a faucet: "I'm here! Disclose your deepest secrets!"

They need space and rapport—gained through a few laughs while moseying down the street, or minutes without a device in hand, or anything other than hustle.

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## Make a habitual time for connecting.

We maintain habits to make sure we don't have bad breath before work or to pick up the kids from school on time. We make space for what matters.

Can relational priorities make the list, too?

**See, vulnerability is like a muscle.** When it's not frequently used, things can come out awkwardly ... or much worse, not at all.

Are you growing your ability to be vulnerable?

Maybe you and a friend enjoy a cup of decaf after work or toss a football around. Or you text your friend to ask how they're doing with that one thing that was so painful the last time you talked.



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## Ask three degrees of why.

When someone comes to their own conclusions for themselves, those conclusions are 100% more effective than our own spiel. Emotionally safe people often provide a home to unpack our junk—and help us do it.

A great listener can carry the power to help you walk away with a deeper knowledge of yourself.

Ask questions that gently, respectfully help isolate the real issues with which their hearts are colliding. Grab questions [here](#).

When in doubt, start with “three degrees of why”.

For example, if your friend is wrestling with discontent at their job,

- *Why* do you suspect your boss’ hide is chapped?
- *Why* does your boss’ discontentment bother you?
- *Why* is failing to please someone so scary?



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## Practice your unshocked face.

When a friend reveals tough, potentially shameful, or embarrassing stories, don’t let your reactions add to their stress.



## Sympathy ≠ Drama.

Being an emotionally safe place doesn't mean getting sucked in—at least in a way that perpetuates anger or hurt. All you empathize out there—it's possible to occasionally feel something so much with someone that we actually don't help restore or repair.

If a friend's marriage is on the rocks, for example, you want to talk to her in a way that helps her to go home and still be married, as long as it's safe. Your sympathy could either divide her further from her husband—or, alternatively, help her return to her problems with renewed strength, vision, and courage.



## Repeat back.

Reiterate what you think your friend is saying: “Are you saying that...” “Am I getting you?” “Is that what you're trying to say?”

To a dying, hopeless single mother in the desert—Hagar—God describes Himself as “the God Who Sees.” This theme reverberates throughout the Bible (see 2 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 139:1-24, 147:5, Hebrews 4:16). Our power to empathize and welcome others as God's welcomed us (Romans 15:7) ultimately reflects God's image in the flesh to the world-weary friend in front of us.

Empathy says, “God so loves you--as an individual. And this is what that might look like, right here, right now.”

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Adapted from “How to Be an Emotionally Safe Place for Your Spouse.” <https://www.janelbreitenstein.com/2022/02/11/emotionally-safe-place/>