

*When one party is in too much pain to hear
the needs of the other, we extend empathy,
taking as long as necessary to ensure that
the person knows their pain is heard.*

—MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

Sitting on Opposite Sides of the Couch



The main goal my partner, Jori, and I have as mediators is to cultivate equality and connection between two parties so that compassion is inspired in each of them. In the way we mediate, we don't put any overt attention on coming to specific resolutions. We trust that once people are connected, compassionate giving and receiving will naturally occur, and that solutions will arise organically based on whatever needs are identified during the process.

So on one particular day, we sat with a married couple who were really in a rough patch. They arrived at the mediation separately, at different times. One came into our mediation room and sat on the end of the couch where disputants typically sit. About five minutes later, the other partner arrived. She sat at the opposite end of the couch. They both settled in and leaned away from each other, pressing against their respective armrests. This gave us a lot of information as we gauged their level of connection.

We explained our process and empathized with them right off the bat. We empathized with how it might feel to come to a

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mediation and to feel so tender and unsure of what would happen next in their relationship.

We began with our usual question: “Who is willing to listen first?”

There was a long silence; nobody really wanted to listen first.

This touches on a really important piece about empathy. Empathy has nothing to do with the words that we say and everything to do with where we put our attention. So Jori and I stayed in that silent space, empathizing with our eyes, with our hearts, with how much these two people both desperately wanted to be understood and heard.

Eventually he said, “I’m willing to listen first.” So she proceeded to launch into her story of pain.

We listened to and stayed with her as she spoke. We empathized out loud and reflected back, or recapped, what we heard in terms of what her needs were. At the point when she mentioned one essential need, we said: “We’d like to carry this over to the other person and see if we can get him to reflect it back. Is that okay with you?”

“That would be great,” she said.

We repeated the need that we heard her mention, to make it easier for him. Let’s just say the need was for understanding. He indicated that he’d be willing to reflect back her need, and he did.

“Thank you.” He’d just given us the gift of fulfilling our request, so we expressed our heartfelt gratitude.

Then we asked him, “Now, what feelings are coming up for you?” and he began telling his side of the story.

We listened to him for a while, acknowledging his experience and boiling it down to one essential point, and then did the same thing as before. We asked him for permission to carry over the essential need to his partner, and she was able to reflect it back. We just kept doing this little dance.

It’s simple, but we call it a mediation dance. We collect a need from one person and carry it over like a gift on Christmas

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morning for the other person to unwrap . . . and we find out how it is to receive that need—that gift.

For this couple, the dance went on for around forty-five minutes. If we had recorded it with a video camera, you'd have seen how their bodies stopped leaning away from each other as the process went on. Although their eyes stayed on us—they still refused to look at each other—their bodies began to relax.

After ten more minutes of continued back-and-forth, we watched as they gradually shifted in their seats until their knees pointed toward each other. They still directed most of their comments to us, though, so we kept the process moving forward.

The formula of finding the need and then reflecting it back is almost like a mechanical process. It's really puzzling why it works, but it does! It connects people at the heart. And this couple was no exception.

They gradually, inch by inch, moved toward each other. After fifteen minutes, this husband and wife began talking directly to each other.

Jori and I backed off and let them talk. Within a couple minutes, they were holding hands and had their heads right next to each other, making an A shape. We couldn't hear a word of their conversation, but it didn't matter. They had connected.

They stayed in this cuddling position for at least another ten minutes, which felt almost timeless. It was just so delicious for me and Jori to empathize with their hard-earned connection, after spending so much time empathizing with their pain. It was really beautiful to be in the presence of that extended moment.

Finally, they came back to us and made eye contact, so we continued with the next part of the mediation process. "Who has any ideas about what they'd like to do next?"

They decided they needed to have a meal together—a date. They hadn't had a date in weeks because of the little time they had together in their busy lives. They walked out hand in hand and left one vehicle behind as they drove away together.

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That was the first step in a process that strengthened their relationship. It took a few other mediations to clarify some agreements, but they really improved the quality of their connection by empathizing with each other using our support.

This experience gave them a renewed reference point—a reminder of what had been lost when they first started blaming each other. They were able to get past the negative mental image of blaming each other and instead remember the person they fell in love with. To support them through the process and help them move past the pain they'd been stuck in—this was a gift we savored. We always do.

—JIM MANSKE, www.radicalcompassion.com

Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. We often have a strong urge to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feeling. Empathy, however, calls upon us to empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being.

—MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

Processing a New Alzheimer's Diagnosis



With my partner still asleep beside me, I stayed in bed one morning because I noticed I was in a funk. A dear friend had been in the hospital, and the trips back and forth to visit her were certainly a little hectic. But something felt really off, and I was having trouble putting my finger on the pulse of it.

I kept thinking about my friend Sherry and how fast her life had gone from normal to complicated. A momentary slip on a wet driveway had led to her needing ankle surgery. The procedure went well, and she'd been released from the hospital, yet her body required the support of a month-long stay at an inpatient rehab facility.

It was depressing and dingy, this rehab place, but her spirits remained quite high. Even though her injuries were purely physical, a lot of people there had suffered from strokes, Alzheimer's, and other maladies affecting cognitive functioning. True to her personality, she used the experience as

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an “opportunity” and began connecting with everyone she met, learning their stories.

Her attitude was inspiring to me, but I still didn’t like that she was there. I began to cry, and hearing me, my partner woke up.

“Hey,” he said, “what is it?”

“I’ve been overwhelmed thinking about this rehab place.

The other night, when I was visiting, it was pretty shocking. Sherry seems to be keeping her chin up about being there, but it’s disturbing. The hallways are dark. A neighbor was screaming, ‘Help me, they’ve kidnapped me!’ the entire time I was there, which is apparently a normal thing. And then a call button alarm at the nurse’s station went off for a half hour straight. I went up and said something to the person behind the counter and she responded, ‘Yeah, I’ve gotten used to the sound, so I don’t even notice it anymore.’ I was appalled and asked, ‘But doesn’t it mean someone needs something?’”

“Wow,” he said, pulling me into a hug. “That’s unsettling.”

“I just can’t stop thinking about my dad ending up in one of those places, with people behind the counter ignoring alerts. I had to tell myself they must be ignoring it for a reason because the lady was so nonchalant, but it was hard to listen to it for so long. I could hear it all the way in Sherry’s room!”

“So this takes you to your dad, huh? You’re thinking about him in that kind of environment?”

“Yes! It’s horrifying!”

The tears really came down. My dad had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s the year before and it was disheartening to visit the hospital, which foreshadowed a potential future for him.

“I mean, I know we’re not there yet. And it could be ten more years before we are. But there might come a time when he’ll need more care than we can give him at home . . .” I trailed off.

“And you’re worried about how that’s going to be?” he asked.

“Yes.” My mind was all over the place. “I don’t feel like I’m doing enough now, honestly. My mom and Stephen and Kathy are

taking on the bulk of things. I told myself I'd fly into town every few months to lend a hand—or at least visit—and I haven't. I've only gone twice. It seems so insufficient."

"Feeling guilty? You want to help out more?"

"Yeah. It's hard. I had hoped Kevin would make a trip this past summer. He and I talked about it several times, but it never happened. And I never went, either. I really want to be there while my dad is still himself, so we can connect, you know? We have no idea how long we have. I mean, we talk on the phone all the time, but . . . I don't know."

"So," he said, trying to reflect back, "some of this is about you and your brother Kevin helping out Stephen, Kathy, and your mom back home, and everyone working together. And some of it is just about valuing the time you have left with your dad?"

"Exactly!" I paused for a bit, switching gears. "It reminds me of an Alzheimer's patient I met at the rehab place while eating with Sherry in the TV room. I was working on a jigsaw puzzle and a man came in, muttering and pointing at the puzzle. I had no idea what he wanted, and I couldn't even tell if he was upset or just trying to tell me something. His daughter arrived a few minutes later. We found out he used to be an engineer. As she translated his sounds and gestures, it turned out he was simply trying to give me advice on how to work a puzzle, by doing the edges first. It was heartbreaking! He used to be an engineer!"

We sighed together, lying there, and as more tears spilled, he continued to stay with my nonlinear train of thought.

"Yeah," he said. "It's just painful to think about that kind of loss."

"Yes, it is. That's exactly it." I agreed. "And that wasn't even the worst of it. I forgot to tell you this part. Later on that same trip, I saw a different man who apparently takes off all his clothes every night, strips the sheets off his bed, and runs around. He came out, naked and confused, while I was trying to talk to the glazed-over orderly behind the counter. She had to rush off to help him!"

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“Oh my God!” he exclaimed.

“I know. I just can’t . . .” I trailed off, not knowing how to finish my sentence.

Taking a breath, he tilted his head and asked, “Is this—everything you’re saying—is it about *dignity*? Are you wanting dignity for those patients you’ve met, and needing to trust that your dad will have a sense of dignity as he declines?”

When he asked me that question, something lifted as one last stream of tears gave way. I felt a huge sense of relief flood my body, like when you finally lie down at the end of a long day.

“Yes, oh my gosh. Dignity . . .” I said, letting my mind sit with this concept. “That’s it. I’m worried that he won’t be held with dignity by us, or by the orderlies and doctors in the future. Yes. I want my dad’s human dignity intact, no matter how he changes. That’s totally it. Dignity!”

The conversation soon wrapped up but stayed with me, fresh, for the rest of the week. I was surprised to feel tangible reverberations of relief run through my body each time I reflected on it. A truth was somehow named. I can’t explain why it mattered so much to be with this idea of dignity, this mantra, this promise to my dad. But it did. It mattered.

—MARY GOYER, www.consciouscommunication.co

*Listening creates a holy silence.
When you listen generously to people, they can
hear truth in themselves, often for the first time.
And in the silence of listening, you can know
yourself in everyone. Eventually you may be able
to hear, in everyone and beyond everyone, the
unseen singing softly to itself and to you.*

—RACHEL NAOMI REMEN

Being With My Teenager's Heartbreak



Here's one of the questions I often pose when teaching parenting classes: "Where do you have a hard time with your kid having a hard time?"

I recently asked myself this same question after returning home from a five-day work trip. My sixteen-year-old was in a bad mood, and I initially thought it was about me. But I made eye contact with her and watched as she slumped down on the couch, saying, "Everything's bad."

I could already feel the urge to reassure her or talk her out of it, even though she hadn't mentioned any details. Instead I said gently, "Well, what is it? What do you want me to know?"

She hesitated, but as she told her story, I understood that she felt left out by friends who were spending more time with each other than with her. There were so many times during this halted

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story that I felt the impulse to jump in and tell her: “Oh, they totally adore you. They love you.”

Or I could’ve given her advice like, “Well, have you asked them this or that?”

But I somehow managed to hold my tongue and not give unsolicited advice or unrequested reassurance. Instead, I stuck to the basics—reflection (recapping), empathy, and plain old listening.

One thing I said was, “So when they go off at fourth period and spend time together, it sounds like you end up feeling lonely, you know? Do you wish they knew how much you miss them, but maybe it feels a little bit too vulnerable to say that?”

She softened and cried. “Yeah, it’s like I feel stuck. I can’t really express anything to them. I can’t say anything to them because they’d just blow it off.”

What also came out was that she had tried to express her concern to several other friends, but they had given her either advice or reassurance, and she was so discouraged that they didn’t seem to really hear her.

By the end of the twenty minutes that we sat together, she had both laughed and cried. She said she felt some relief, and she thanked me for listening. I felt close to her and she felt heard. I had averted reinforcing the idea that nobody was listening, which she had experienced with her friends.

I also realized that if I had assumed she was mad at me, I may have cut her off at the very beginning, which would’ve been such a missed opportunity. Instead, I met her where so many of us have been: feeling left out, wanting to know that we matter and belong, and that our friends adore us. I would have missed something really sweet.

—KRISTIN MASTERS, www.nvcsantacruz.org