



In a recent study, Dr. Shiri Cohen and her colleagues looked at empathy in 156 heterosexual couples in committed relationships. The researchers wanted to know what would be more important to relationship satisfaction: empathic accuracy (each person's ability to correctly identify the other's emotion) or perceived empathic effort (each person's perception that the other person is trying to understand). The couples were videotaped in the lab while discussing a recent upsetting event. The researchers found that perceived empathic effort was more strongly linked to relationship satisfaction than empathic accuracy.

Although this study was focused on couples and recommendations were made for couples therapy, I think the general findings can be applied to any relationship. Each of us is unique and it is unlikely that someone else can truly understand us at any given moment. What is important for the relationship, however, is the process of trying to understand the other. How do you do this? By being a good listener.

- **Get out of your own way.** If you are listening only to wait until you have a chance to speak, it's hard to focus on the other person. Try instead to temporarily put your needs on hold and to put your energy into trying to understand the other person's experience.
- **Ask questions if something isn't clear.** The purpose of these questions is for increased understanding and clarity, e.g., "I don't understand, do you mean the colour is blue or green?"
- **Think about the relationship.** Anticipate success in resolving differences before starting a difficult conversation. You're more likely to respond with respect if you value the relationship and this tone is contagious.
- **Pay attention to the feelings.** Sometimes, it's more important to just be present than to try to put things into words. Other times, it can be helpful to acknowledge the feelings you see in the other person, e.g., "It's hard for me to see you upset. I don't know what to say right now."
- **Be tentative.** Assume that you don't completely understand, and that the other person is the expert of his or her own experience. For example, "I'm just guessing, but I think this is what's going on. What do you think?"

For the clinician:

Cohen, S., Schultz, M., Weiss, E., & Waldinger, R. (2012). Eye of the beholder: The individual and dyadic contributions of accuracy and perceived empathic effort to relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26, 236-245.

For the general public:

Paterson, R. (2000). *The assertiveness workbook: How to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger. See the chapter on constructive confrontation for information on listening skills during conflict.

Are you ready to make a change that counts? I have over 20 years clinical experience helping people feel better, move forward in their lives, and create more satisfying relationships.

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