



UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

A Quick Guide to Small Groups





Summary

Empathy is one of the greatest tools of ministry as you care for and relate to others. But as a leader, it is also the heaviest burden that you will carry.



Two Minute Read



Small Group Commitment #3 *Accept Ownership*



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As the pandemic spreads, a beautiful thing is happening. While the world fights the universal enemy COVID-19, a sleeping giant is waking up. The world has banded together in not just unity, but more importantly—*empathy*.

Empathy is more than kindness or compassion. It's deeply personal.

Empathy is the ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings and needs, and to use that knowledge to guide your actions and respond appropriately. Empathy is different from the Golden Rule as you *do to others what you would have them do to you* (Matthew 7:12). It's not about how I want others to treat me. In fact, it's not about me at all. Empathy is learning how to treat others in the way *they* want to be treated.

Through empathy, we can tell others that they are not alone. We can say, "I'm with you."

It is more than a smile or wave from the parking lot. Empathy is about putting aside your own feelings, emotions, thoughts and desires as you lock arms and join someone else. It's about connecting with someone as you listen, understand and share experiences together. It's about feeling the same pressures, pains, joys and victories.



Theological Truth

The Apostle Paul, who penned the greatest theological truths of the world, knew the meaning of empathy. In Romans 12:15, Paul says one of the marks of a true Christian is those *who rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep*. This isn't a nice thought for the church. It's a command. This is empathy. From crying with those who hurt, to jumping for joy with those who rejoice, we are called to empathize.

Empathy is a beautiful and biblical response as we minister to others. Yet, it can easily become a struggle as we absorb the pain of others.

As a Small Group Leader, the challenge of empathy is to enter the lives of the people in your small group while not allowing the myriad of problems and pains to overcome you and crush you. When the crisis of others creeps in and suddenly becomes your crisis, the weight can become unbearable. Though empathy can encompass the full range of emotions from awesome highs to crushing lows, it's usually the lows that are absorbed and transferred to others.

Empathy is one of the greatest tools of ministry. But as a leader, it can be one of the heaviest burdens you will carry. As you step into the shoes and enter the lives of others, there are times the lows add up and become too much. It's one thing to have one person or a couple in your small group who are struggling, but what if it's multiple people or everyone at the same time? This is when ministry can quickly become a burden. This is when leader's burn out.



Ideas to Consider

Here are some ways to practice empathy, but not become burned out as a leader:

- **You can't fix everything.** You can encourage others by entering their shoes, but you cannot change what's already happened or the way that people feel.
- **Know your limits.** God has wired each of us differently in the way we minister. Even Jesus had to withdraw from the crowds and take time to be alone.
- **Create boundaries.** Don't let the crisis of someone else become your crisis. If you easily absorb the pain of others, limit how many people you're caring for.
- **Take the long view.** God can use you to help others, but He also uses other people, life experiences and the blessing of time to strengthen our faith. Through empathy, we live with an eye toward eternity as we long for a far better place.



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