



## Understanding Other People

### Predicting Feelings

Imagine yourself in this situation: A friend asks you to a party. You learn that all the girls in your group were invited — except for Paula. How do you think Paula will feel if she finds out?

- A. angry
- B. sad
- C. hurt
- D. excluded
- E. confused
- F. nervous
- G. embarrassed
- H. indifferent

You probably came up with your answer by putting yourself in Paula's shoes and imagining how you'd feel. Most people in this situation will feel some or all of emotions A through D: angry, sad, hurt, and excluded. It's not as likely that someone who is left out will feel confused, nervous, embarrassed, or indifferent.

Being able to predict how other people might feel is a part of emotional intelligence (EQ for short). It's a skill we can all develop with practice.

**When we understand how other people are likely to feel, it can guide our interactions with them.** For example, in the party example above, what if Paula asks: "Are you going to Regan's party?" Knowing that she wasn't invited probably influences how you respond. You might say (or avoid saying!) any of the following:

- A. "Yes, I'm going — are you?"
- B. "Yes, I'm going. I feel awkward telling you. Is it true she didn't invite you?"
- C. "Yes, everyone's going!"
- D. "Of course I'm going! It's going to be the best party of the whole year!"
- E. "Yes. I'm sorry you weren't invited. I don't think Regan meant to hurt your feelings, I heard her parents only allowed her to ask a few people."

If you didn't know Paula wasn't invited, you might answer with A, C, or D. Because you know the full story, though, you're more likely to consider Paula's feelings and answer with B or E. Answers C and D are the kinds of things you say when you know for sure the other person has been invited.

### Reading Body Language

Sometimes you get more information about a situation from what a person *doesn't* say: **Part of emotional intelligence is reading the signals people send and taking them into account.**

Let's say Paula approaches you, looking upset. She asks: "Are you going to Regan's party on Saturday?" Her emotional signals (body language, facial expression) clue you in that Paula knows she wasn't invited. In that situation, you might still answer with option A, but you'd probably be more likely to choose B or E.

But what if Paula approaches you looking cheerful and says: "Hey, I heard Regan is having a party this weekend. Are you going?" Based on her body language, you might conclude, "Oh, she doesn't know and she's expecting an invite."

If you have good EQ, you probably feel conflicted about telling Paula you're going to the party when you know she's the only one who's not invited. Even though it's up to Paula to manage her own emotions, you probably feel **empathy** for her. You know that how you respond can help her feel supported or make her feel worse, so you choose your words accordingly.

### Making Sense of Reactions

The skill of understanding others helps us predict what people might feel in a certain situation, but it also allows us to make sense of how people *react*.

For example:

In homeroom at 8 a.m., your friend is smiling, friendly, and full of energy. Later that afternoon, he looks upset, almost like he might cry. Which explanation is your best guess for what might have happened between these two times?

- A. He had a fight with his girlfriend at lunch, and now they're not talking.
- B. He passed the 4th period algebra exam.
- C. He just found out he didn't make the final cut for varsity basketball.
- D. The chemistry teacher assigned a lot of homework.
- E. He probably just had a bad day.

You likely ruled out option B instantly: Emotional intelligence tells you that your friend's reaction looks more like failing an exam than passing. If your friend had a bad day or a lot of homework (options D or E), he might seem stressed out, tired, or worn down — but he probably wouldn't be on the verge of tears. Ruling out those options lets you zero in on what's most likely to be upsetting your friend: options A or C.

People who are skilled at understanding others imagine another person's feelings ("I think he'll feel awful if I say that to him"). They are able to relate to how that person reacts to things ("Oh, I completely get why she got angry like that. No wonder!"). **Understanding how others feel, act, and react helps us build better relationships.**

## How to Build This Skill

It's not always easy to predict or understand how someone else feels. Some people are better at it than others, but just about everyone can improve with practice. Understanding others is all about watching and listening.

### It Starts With Watching

If you see someone trip and fall, you probably wince — ouch! — as if it happened to you. We have a natural tendency to sense what other people feel just by watching them. Scientists think there's a biological reason for this. They believe that brain cells called "mirror neurons" activate in the same way whether we do something ourselves or watch another person do it.

Try these ways to develop your observation skills:

- **Look at people's expressions and body language.** Next time you're at the mall, in the coffee shop, or on the subway or bus, try this: Look around and try to identify how people might be feeling based on their body language, facial expressions, and what they're doing. The girl with the textbooks on her knee might have an exam coming up. Does she seem confident — or stressed? What about the guy with his eyes closed? Is he feeling peaceful? Tired? Upset?
- **Read books or watch movies that have realistic portrayals of human emotions.** Pay attention to how different characters feel and act. Try to understand why the characters feel the way they do. Based on those emotions, predict what a character will do next. Or see if you can explain why a character did what he or she did.

### It Improves With Listening

People who are good at understanding others are usually good listeners. Research shows that the better someone listens, the more connected that person feels with the person who is talking. This produces a feeling of bonding and closeness.

Most of us rate ourselves as good listeners — after all, listening seems like such a simple, basic thing to do. But often we're so busy thinking of what we want to say that we don't listen as much as we'd like. Here are some ways to build good listening skills:

- **Practice listening well in everyday conversations.** Really pay attention to what the other person is saying. Train yourself to think of listening as more important than talking.
- **Tune in to feelings as well as story.** When a friend tells you about something, try to imagine how he or she might have felt. Make statements that show you're trying to understand your friend's experience, like: "Oh, that must have felt amazing!" or "That must be upsetting for you." You'll probably notice that you feel closer, more "in sync" with the person. You might find you can predict what your friend will say next.
- **Take time to listen to someone in depth.** Interview a friend or family member about a special time in his or her life. For example, ask your parents about their wedding day or get your grandparents to tell you about having their first child. Try to imagine what the experience was really like for them. Ask them to tell you more about how they felt and why.

## Turning Understanding Into Compassion

After building your skills in understanding others, how do you use that knowledge? If you're like most people, you use it to help and support the people you care about. This is **compassion**, and compassion helps us form relationships. Try these three ways to be more compassionate:

1. **Ask others what they need.** If a friend is going through a difficult time, ask what you can do to help. If your friend says, "I don't know," think about what you'd want in the same situation, then offer to do something similar.
2. **Show a sincere interest in others.** Be curious about the people you know — not in a nosy or fake way, but in a way that shows you want to understand them a little better. For example, ask about the kinds of things they like to do, or about their feelings, ideas, and opinions.
3. **Act with kindness.** When you hear gossip, ridicule, or unkind teasing, make it your first reaction to imagine how it would feel to be on the receiving end. That can help you tune in to other people's feelings and refuse to join in.

Even small acts of compassion can build positive social connections (try saying "hi" to someone who is sitting alone at lunch and see how it makes you feel). Scientists now know that strong social connections influence our health, happiness, and even how long we live.

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