

# Perspective-Taking & Perspective- Getting

## Different Methods of Building Empathy

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### Empathy Training Series

**BWBR Description:** These exercises create opportunities for participants to practice perspective-taking and perspective-getting in order to gain a better understanding of what empathy is and how it may be enacted. Exercises may be completed as one whole workshop, or they may be used separately in other settings.

**Overview:** These exercises give participants an opportunity to try out three of the most common methods of building empathy, to compare them, and to analyze their benefits and shortcomings. In each of three progressively more complex rounds, participants will perform an empathy-building activity. Discussion will follow each round, and there will be time to journal at the end of the workshop. This workshop can be done with any number of people as long as they can be separated into smaller groups.

**Category:** diversity; communication skills; dialogue; reflection

**Level:** These exercises are suitable for all levels, but they would work especially well for freshmen or new students who do not yet know each other.

**Bonner Outcomes:** Critical Thinking and Perspective Taking

Communication Skills  
Diversity and Intercultural Competence  
Empathy

**Focus or Goals of this Guide:**

- Participants will practice perspective-taking and perspective-getting
- Participants will analyze methods of developing empathy
- Participants will reflect on their experience together and individually

**Materials:**

Online

1. A selection of digital images with human subjects, giving proper credit to creators
2. A Padlet containing the digital images mentioned above and a corresponding link
3. Documents with the group reflection questions
4. A document with sample empathic questions
5. A document with examples of perspective-taking and perspective-getting
6. Zoom or other online video call platform
7. Pen and paper (if necessary, for writing down ideas as well as reflection)

In-Person

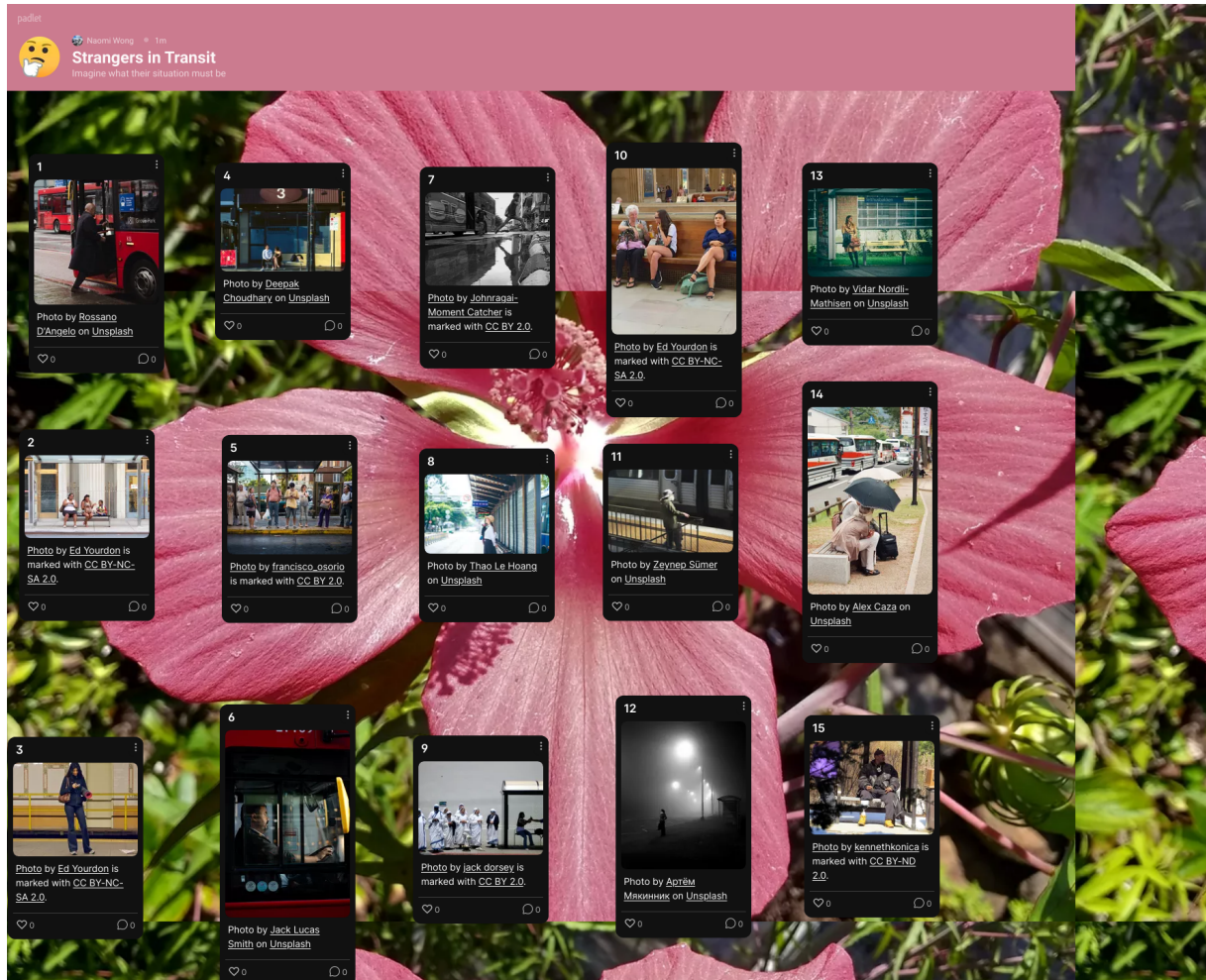
1. Old magazines or newspapers
2. Paper and pens
3. Glue sticks
4. Scissors
5. Handouts with group reflection questions
6. A handout with sample empathic questions
8. A document with examples of perspective-taking and perspective-getting

**How to Prepare:**

Online

Set up a Padlet on [padlet.com](https://padlet.com) by posting all of the pictures on it. Photos with flexible licensing can be found on sites like [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com) or [creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org), which offer many free photos for noncommercial use. Don't forget to credit the photographers when necessary! You can do this by mentioning their name and including links to their photo and/or their website in the "Comment" field of the post. Numbering each post in the "Title" field will help participants to keep track of which photo they have chosen.

See the example below to get an idea:



### Tips for curating your photo selection:

- Choose photos that show people in an everyday activity. The above example shows people waiting at transit stations. This will be familiar to people who have either traveled a lot or who live in a place where public transit is a part of everyday life. Think about what may be familiar to your participants, and choose pictures that portray a setting that they are likely to consider mundane so that the people in the photo will be foregrounded rather than the setting itself. For instance, if the participants are college students, consider making the Padlet's theme "Strangers on

Campus” and choosing photos of different people hanging out, walking around, or working on a college campus.

- Choose photos that evoke a variety of human emotions and general experiences. Try to include pictures with different lighting, some with lots of shadows while others are very bright.
  - Make sure to choose photos with a good balance of subjects of different genders, ages, and races or ethnicities.
  - Choose photos with different kinds of color schemes, landscapes, and perspectives: outdoors and indoors, close-up and distance shots.
  - Fifteen photos should be enough to get the conversation started. It would also be acceptable to tailor the number of photos to the number of participants.
- Note:  
Discussion questions are organized to start with simple topics and progressively become more complex.
  - Accessibility: To make this session accessible for individuals with visual impairment, you may want to consider including sounds or short bits of monologue or dialogue (link to these on Youtube or elsewhere) on the Padlet, and invite them to imagine the backstory of the speaker.

### In-Person

Magazines and/or newspapers, glue sticks, scissors, and paper should be provided on the tables where the participants are seated.

- Accessibility: To make this session accessible for individuals with visual impairment, you may want to consider including bringing in a selection of everyday objects, like keys, buttons, pens, tools, etc. Invite these participants to imagine the backstory of the object and its owner (i.e.—Who does it belong to? What has the object been used for? How does the owner feel about this object?)

### **Helpful Articles:**

Typical definitions of empathy involve trying to take the other person’s point of view, imagining oneself in their shoes. Harvard Business Review gives a compelling case for why simply asking people what they think is better than imagining what they think. For best preparation for this exercise, read “Research: Perspective-Taking Doesn’t Help You Understand What Others Want” at the following link:

<https://hbr.org/2018/10/research-perspective-taking-doesnt-help-you-understand-what-others-want>

One exercise in this guide will involve using empathic statements as a response to someone sharing their feelings, desires, goals, and motivations. For background information on empathy development and practice, read this article by Jeremy Sutton, "Developing Empathy: 8 Strategies & Worksheets for Becoming More Empathetic": <https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>. The section "24 Questions and Statements to Use With Your Clients" is especially helpful, and some of the empathic statements from that section have been adapted for this guide.

### **Brief Outline:**

The basic outline for this session is:

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 1) Welcome                                   | suggested time 7-10 minutes      |
| 2) Empathizing With Strangers                | suggested time 20-30 minutes     |
| 3) Practice Perspective-Taking With Stories  | suggested time 20-30 minutes     |
| 4) Practice Perspective-Getting With Stories | suggested time 20-30 minutes     |
| 5) Individual Reflection                     | suggested time 5-10 minutes      |
| 6) Wrap Up                                   | suggested time 5-10 minutes      |
|  | Total: Approximately 120 minutes |

### **Part 1) Welcome**

Suggested time: 7-10 minutes

Welcome the participants. Make sure everyone knows everyone else's name. Feel free to use a short icebreaker such as:

*Welcome, everyone! To get us started today, let's make sure we all know each other. Let's go around one at a time and share our name and a favorite pastime.*

Then, you can begin to introduce the exercise. It would be a good idea, rather than simply starting with a dictionary definition of empathy, to ask the participants what they believe empathy to be.

*Today, we are going to have a conversation about empathy. What comes to mind when you think of empathy?*

Ask participants to free-associate, naming words or phrases that come to mind when they hear "empathy."

### Online

If the group is big, invite everyone to type their responses in the chat. Then, invite a couple participants to share verbally. If the group is small (5-7 participants), invite each participant to share.

### In-Person

Pair-Share: Suggest people to pair-up (partner) with someone sitting next to them, and share their responses. Then, invite a couple people to share with the whole group.

Express appreciation for the responses that were given, then state the goal of the exercise.

*This is really great. You all have given some awesome responses. Empathy is a concept that people have many different ideas about. Common definitions of empathy involve understanding someone else's point of view or feeling what they feel, but these ideas of empathy are difficult to measure. The uncertainty surrounding the definition and measurement of empathy present a challenge to understanding how to develop empathy.*

*There are many different views on what helps people to build empathy. Some people believe that the imagination plays a huge role in understanding someone else's perspective. Others believe that it is always best to ask people for their perspective in order to have the most accurate view. Both ideas have some merit. Today, we will have the opportunity to compare these different imagination-based perspective-taking and information-soliciting perspective-getting activities.*

## **Part 2) Empathizing With Strangers**

Suggested time: 20-30 minutes

This activity involves participants choosing a photograph of a human subject and imagining what it must be like to be the person depicted. This is a type of perspective-taking in which participants will make judgments about a person's situation without being able to speak to that person. People both consciously and subconsciously make use of this kind of perspective-taking in everyday encounters with strangers.

### Step 1 - Imagine

#### Online

Indicate that the group will be using a Padlet for this exercise. Supply the link to the Padlet in the chat. Explain to the participants that they will use the comment function

on the Padlet to supply their assessment of the situation of the person in the picture. It is okay if multiple people comment on the same photo. Multiple interpretations of the same photo could be an opportunity for an interesting compare and contrast:

*Choose one of the photos on the Padlet and imagine what must be the situation of the person in the photo. Then, type in the comment section of the post containing the photo some of your ideas about who the person is, where they have come from or where they are going, and what their goals are.*

Note: Participants can enlarge their assigned photo by clicking on it.

### In-Person

Indicate that the group will use the magazines or newspapers, paper, glue, and scissors for this exercise. Participants will select a photo of a human subject from the magazines or newspapers, cut it out, and paste it to a piece of paper. Then, they will write their assessment of the situation of the person in the picture. They can do this in a list format or a paragraph.

*Take a few minutes to study your photo. Imagine what must be the situation of the person in the photo. Then, write on the paper around the photo some of your ideas about who the person is, where they have come from or where they are going, and what their goals are.*

Give about five minutes to the participants to study their photo and record their assessments of the situations depicted.

### Step 2 - Share

#### Online

Create breakout groups that are divisible by four, if possible. If there are 20 participants, create 5 groups or breakout rooms. If you have an odd number of people, groups of three can work as well.

#### In-Person

Divide the participants into groups of four for sharing. If possible, each participant should display the photo they chose and share their assessment of the subject's identity, the person's destination and/or origin, and what the person's goals are.

Sharing should progress at roughly 3 minutes per person, although there are a few minutes built in here for buffer.

Note:

Group Size: Having small groups (no larger than 4) enables everyone to have the time to share. This process helps to build a sense of community.

After approximately 10-12 minutes, send a signal to wrap-up their conversation in a minute. Then, bring everyone back to the whole group. Thank them for participating in the activity, and let them know that it is time to discuss this experience.

### Step 3 - Discuss

Here are some questions for discussion:

1. What was it like to try to imagine the life and experience of someone only from looking at them?
2. What clues did you look for in order to make your decisions about the situation of the person in your photo?
3. What kinds of benefits are there to this way of trying to be empathetic? What kinds of drawbacks are there to this way of trying to be empathetic?

Note:

Going over the questions about the participants' experience with the exercise first may make it easier for them to answer the more complex questions.

## **Part 3) Practice Perspective-Taking With Stories**

Suggested time: 20-30 minutes

This activity involves participants taking each other's perspective with information from one sentence. Participants will be working in groups again. If possible, there should be four participants to a group. It does not matter whether these are the same groups as in the previous exercise. If you are online, it may be easiest to use the "random selection" function to assign breakout rooms.

### Step 1 - Remember

Invite each participant to come up with one sentence that describes an event in their life (ex: I lost my cap at my high school graduation). Remind participants not to choose the best or worst moment of their life and so not to share beyond their comfort level.



## Step 2 - Share

Participants will divide into groups for this portion of the exercise. In these groups, participants should partner up. In their pairs, one participant will be the “author” and the other will be the “storyteller.” The authors will each share a sentence about their life event, then the storyteller will elaborate on that sentence.

Storytellers will tell a story about how the author of the example must have experienced the event, using their own sense of how they would feel in the situation described. In their story, storytellers should include details such as the author’s supposed feelings, goals, motivations, and desires.

For example:

The Author’s Statement:

“I lost my cap at my high school graduation.”

A Storyteller’s Perspective-Taking Response:

“[Insert Author’s name here] was really sad to lose his/her/their graduation cap because [the Author] dearly loved his/her/their high school. [The Author] was motivated by urgency over the sentimental value of the cap to recruit his/her/their whole family to search for the cap. [The Author]’s desire was to find the cap at all costs, even if it meant being late for the celebratory activities after the ceremony.”

Authors should refrain from disclosing the original story in this round because they will have a chance to share their side of the story in the next round.

After two authors have shared and two storytellers have elaborated (in their small groups of four), participants should switch roles. Remaining with their same partners, former authors will be storytellers and vice versa.

Remind participants to keep their sharing brief, to be creative, and to have fun with this activity since it is only make-believe.

After approximately 10-12 minutes, send a signal to wrap-up their conversation in a minute. Then, bring everyone back to the whole group. Thank them for participating in the activity, and let them know that it is time to discuss this experience.

## Step 3 - Discuss

1. What was it like to try to tell someone's story off of only a sentence's worth of information? What was it like hearing your story told by someone who had just a sentence's worth of information?
2. What are the benefits and drawbacks of trying to empathize with someone based off of limited information, even from ideas of their own expression? For instance, information we get from posts on social media or one sentence we overhear in a conversation.
3. Potential further discussion (if time permits): When is it acceptable to tell someone else's story? When is it not?

Note:

Going over the questions about the participants' experience with the exercise first may make it easier for them to answer the more complex questions.

#### **Part 4) Practice Perspective-Getting With Stories**

Suggested time: 20-30 minutes

This activity involves participants getting each other's perspective by asking follow-up questions that solicit information about feelings, desires, and goals. Using the life events described in the previous activity, participants will engage in deeper discussion.

Note: If you are using this exercise separately, follow Step 1 from Part 3 of this guide before starting this activity.

Participants will be working in groups again. It is strongly recommended that participants return to the same groups and the same partners as in the previous exercise in order to obtain the deepest level of discussion.

If you are online, you can assign breakout rooms manually to make sure the groups are the same as before. However, if the group is large, this may take too much time. In that case, this exercise can still work using randomly assigned breakout rooms.

##### Step 1 - Share

Participants will complete this exercise in groups. If applicable, remind them to stay with the same partner as in the previous exercise. This time, their roles will be "author" and "interviewer."

If needed, authors may repeat the sentence they shared about their life event. This time, the interviewer will ask the author follow-up questions about how they felt about the event that they described and/or what was significant about the event. They may also ask about the author's goals, desires, and motivations.

**Here are some sample questions** using the previous example of the lost graduation cap from Part 3 of this guide:

1. How did you feel when you lost your graduation cap?
2. How would you describe the situation (hilarious, tense, ordinary)?
3. Did you find your cap? If so, how?

Authors should answer these questions at their own comfort level, and they may also offer any additional information about the story that they feel is important. The interviewer may respond with an empathic statement. Participants are welcome to formulate their own empathic responses, but they may also need some examples to get them started.

**Here are some examples of empathic statements:**

1. Thank you for your honesty.
2. That sounds like an incredibly [insert an adjective you believe fits the person's experience like difficult/fulfilling/exciting/scary, etc.] experience.
3. I would be [insert feeling word like angry/happy/sad, etc.] about that, too.
4. I can see why that experience is so significant for you.
5. I can see why you reacted the way you did.

After two authors have shared and two interviewers have asked follow-up questions (in their small groups of four), participants should switch roles. Remaining with their same partners, former authors will be interviewers and vice versa.

Remind participants to share briefly.

After approximately 10-12 minutes, send a signal to wrap-up their conversation in a minute. Then, bring everyone back to the whole group. Thank them for participating in the activity, and let them know that it is time to discuss this experience.

### Step 3 - Discuss

1. What was it like being asked for your feelings about a particular event? What was it like asking for that information?
2. Did your views of the original statements given by the authors change after asking questions and hearing the additional information that they offered? If so, how? If not, what do you think could have been helpful to your process of gaining a deeper understanding of the authors' point of view?
3. When is it helpful to ask for information about feelings and experiences? When is it not helpful to ask for this kind of information?
4. Deeper discussion: We have seen that getting information about someone's feelings is necessary to understanding their perspective, but do you think it is sufficient? If so, what in particular makes this knowledge the key to seeing things from someone else's point of view? If not, what other factors, in addition to knowledge of someone else's feelings, might be needed in this process?

Note: There are many different opinions about the answer to these questions. The goal of this discussion is not to find one right answer, but to brainstorm about different ways empathy can be built.

## Part 5) Individual Reflection Time

5-10 minutes

Invite participants to reflect silently on their experience through writing.

### Here are some example reflection questions:

1. What did you learn about the different methods of building empathy?
2. Which methods of building empathy do you believe would be the most helpful in your everyday life? Which do you think would be a challenge for you?

Online participants may choose whether to reflect using pen and paper or a word processor on their computer.

*Today, we explored three different methods of building empathy that used varying levels of obtaining information. Take the next few minutes to reflect on what you learned about the different methods of building empathy. Which methods of building empathy do you believe would be the most helpful in your everyday life? Which do you think would be a challenge for you?*

## Part 6) Wrap Up

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

*Affirm how well the group engaged this exploratory process. Offer a few words about how the process of building empathy is open-ended and that it offers an opportunity for personal growth. Include any other observations and encouragement about group discussion and interaction here.*

### **Credits:**

Developed in 2022 by Naomi M. Wong, Princeton Seminary Field Education Intern to the Bonner Foundation.

### **Resources:**

Eyal, Tal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley. "Research: Perspective-Taking Doesn't Help You Understand What Others Want," in Harvard Business Review, October 9, 2018. Accessed March 6, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2018/10/research-perspective-taking-doesnt-help-you-understand-what-others-want>

Sutton, Jeremy. "Developing Empathy: 8 Strategies & Worksheets for Becoming More Empathetic" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>

## Empathic Statements:

Empathic statements are statements that we use to help someone know that we have been listening to them and to acknowledge their feelings. Once we have identified the feelings that someone links to a certain experience, we may also note that we would have similar feelings in the same situation. These sorts of similarities can be expressed in the empathic statement.

Here are some examples of empathic statements:

1. Thank you for your honesty.
2. That sounds like an incredibly [insert an adjective you believe fits the person's experience like difficult/fulfilling/exciting/scary, etc.] experience.
3. I would be [insert feeling word like angry/happy/sad, etc.] about that, too.
4. I can see why that experience is so significant for you.
5. I can see why you reacted the way you did.

## Relevant Resource:

Sutton, Jeremy. "Developing Empathy: 8 Strategies & Worksheets for Becoming More Empathetic" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>

## Perspective-Taking and Perspective-Getting Example:

The Author's Statement:

"I lost my cap at my high school graduation."

A Storyteller's Perspective-Taking Response:

"[Insert Author's name here] was really sad to lose his/her/their graduation cap because [the Author] dearly loved his/her/their high school. [The Author] was motivated by urgency over the sentimental value of the cap to recruit his/her/their whole family to search for the cap. [The Author]'s desire was to find the cap at all costs, even if it meant being late for the celebratory activities after the ceremony."

Follow-Up Questions For A Perspective-Getting Interviewer:

1. How did you feel when you lost your graduation cap?
2. How would you describe the situation (hilarious, tense, ordinary)?
3. Did you find your cap? If so, how?

## Discussion Questions for Part 2) Empathizing With Strangers:

1. What was it like to try to imagine the life and experience of someone only from looking at them?
2. What clues did you look for in order to make your decisions about the situation of the person in your photo?
3. What kinds of benefits are there to this way of trying to be empathetic? What kinds of drawbacks are there to this way of trying to be empathetic?



### Discussion Questions for Part 3) Practice Perspective-Taking With Stories:

1. What was it like to try to tell the story of someone off of only a sentence's worth of information? What was it like hearing your story told by someone with just a sentence's worth of information?
2. What are the benefits and drawbacks of trying to empathize with someone based off of limited information, even from ideas of their own expression? For instance, information we get from posts on social media or one sentence we overhear in a conversation.
3. Potential further discussion (if time permits): When is it acceptable to tell someone else's story? When is it not?

## Discussion Questions for Part 4) Practice Perspective-Getting With Stories:

1. What was it like being asked for your feelings about a particular event? What was it like asking for that information?
2. Did your views of the original statements given by the authors change after asking questions and hearing the additional information that they offered? If so, how? If not, what do you think could have been helpful to your process of gaining a deeper understanding of the authors' point of view?
3. When is it helpful to ask for information about feelings and experiences? When is it not helpful to ask for this kind of information?
4. Deeper discussion: We have seen that getting information about someone's feelings is necessary to understanding their perspective, but do you think it is sufficient? If so, what in particular makes this knowledge the key to seeing things from someone else's point of view? If not, what other factors, in addition to knowledge of someone else's feelings, might be needed in this process?

Note: There are many different opinions about the answer to these questions. The goal of this discussion is not to find one right answer, but to brainstorm about different ways empathy can be built.