

BEGINNING A PRACTICE IN EMPATHY

We can choose how we listen to, and make sense of, what comes to us. If we reflect a bit, we see that our choices have quite different results. For most of us, we respond out of habit, and as onlookers to the other. Through Compassionate Communication, we have a choice to participate with them.

For example, suppose someone says to us, **“Do you have any idea how thoughtless you’ve been?”** What are our choices?

When I hear this comment, I can choose to respond by...



As an onlooker...

Taking it personally. I internalize the judgment, blame myself for being thoughtless, tell myself I should be more thoughtful and begin a free fall toward shame, guilt and depression. I choose, “I’m at fault and to blame.”

Concluding I’m under attack. I interpret what’s been said as a critical judgment and react defensively. “That’s not true. What about what you did!” I choose that the other person must be wrong and therefore to blame.

Or I have another option. I can choose to respond by...



Participating in the life of...

Sensing my own feelings and needs. I can take a breath and connect to whatever might be stimulated in me when I hear what the other person is saying to me. I ask myself, “What am I feeling: frustrated, confused, scared? What am I needing: consideration, understanding, respect?” I choose to empathize with myself. This is self-empathy.

Sensing the feelings and needs of the other. I seek to sense what the person is feeling—frustrated? What the person is needing—consideration? I might guess to see if I understand them as they would like. If my guess “lands”, the person will feel understood. If not, they will say it again, or give me more information. It’s not about me guessing correctly. I can try again. I am choosing to empathize. This is empathy.

As we bring our intention into how we choose to participate in life’s arising, we cultivate the *“inner faculty of allowing the impressions of the outer world to reach [us] only in ways [we] have chosen”* (Steiner). We gain s e l f -

mastery.

...[participatory consciousness] can be entered into by plunging into looking, which means by a redeployment of attention into sense perception and away from the [onlooker] mind.

Henri Bortoft, [The Wholeness of Nature](#)