

Upper Intermediate – Empathising with Another Person’s Feelings

Aim: To help students be more understanding of other people’s feelings and listen, as well as more empathetic.

Lead-in: Put the following table on the board:

| | Frightening or worrying? Why? | How do people feel? |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| climbing to the top of a tall ladder or building | | |
| visiting a jungle with many insect species | | |
| sitting an important exam | | |
| taking the lift | | |
| meeting people for the first time | | |

Explain to students that they should try to imagine exactly what is worrying or frightening about these situations, and how somebody who is stressed out by these situations might actually feel. Make clear to students that this is not about their own personal feelings, but about considering the way different people might feel. Get students to work in pairs and take notes to share with the class. Allow about five minutes.

Elicit students’ thoughts and complete the table with some of the students’ ideas. Get each pair to suggest one more situation or thing which could be frightening or worrying for people and add these to the table (e.g., *going on fast rides at a theme park, going to the dentist, spiders, performing in front of an audience, playing team games, being in the dark, etc.*).

Ask students to imagine they told their best friend about one of their fears. How would they want them to react? Elicit answers such as *I would want my friend to listen, sympathise, comfort me, and try to understand what I’m feeling.*

Now ask students what they think is a bad reaction: (e.g., *laughing, acting like my feelings aren’t important, and using my feelings to talk about themselves*).

Clear the board and write up these distractors:

- Why? Don’t be silly. Insects are harmless!
- I got bitten by one once, so I’ve really got good reason to be scared.
- I know what you mean. They are quite frightening, especially if you don’t expect to see one.

Get students to imagine what the person’s fear might be (*spiders, animals, dogs, etc*). Ask students which distractor (a–c) they think is the most appropriate response to the person’s fear and get them to explain why.

Choose A Scenario: Ask students to work in pairs and choose one of the scenarios (A–C). Explain to students that they should read the situation and invent a dialogue between the two people, with an appropriate response from the person without the fear. When students have completed their dialogues, they should act them out.

Go around the class encouraging students and listening to their dialogues. Make sure students are able to think of appropriate responses for the situations.

Reflection Point: Point out to students that sometimes it’s really difficult to understand why someone might be scared, worried, or not want to do something. However, explain that it’s helpful to try to imagine a situation that makes them feel uncomfortable and that the other person might be feeling the same. Write on the board, *Understand - Sympathise*

Explain to students that if they can try to understand someone’s feelings or views, they can sympathise, and if they can sympathise, they should also be willing to compromise, which means finding a common ground that helps everyone feel better about the situation.

Class discussion: Put each pair with another pair that chose the same scenario. Ask them to act out their dialogues for each other and compare the fears and responses.

Ask them if they felt that their responses showed the appropriate amount of sympathy.

Use the following questions for discussion with the class:

- Imagine you were in the situation you chose (A–C). If your friend hadn't expressed their fear but just refused to do something, what would you have thought or felt?
- What if you had fears and your friend laughed at you. How would you feel?
- How can you be more supportive of your friends or siblings' fears?

Work alone: Ask students to choose a second scenario (A–C) and to work individually. They should create a dialogue on their own, then pair up with someone who approached the same scenario and act out the two options they have put together.

Get some pairs to act out their dialogues for the rest of the class and invite comments as to whether or not they showed the right level of sympathy.

Encourage students to pay attention to body language as they are listening to other students' dialogues. Get students to demonstrate body stances and facial expressions that show sympathy and ones that don't. (Showing sympathy: Leaning in to your partner, sympathetic facial expression. Not showing sympathy: crossing arms, showing ridicule on your face, looking shocked.)

Extension: Talk with students about phobias. Point out that many people suffer from phobias, and they are sometimes difficult for others to understand. Ask students to guess what they think the following phobias are: *vertigo*, *arachnophobia*, *agoraphobia*, *claustrophobia* (respectively: *fear of heights*, *fear of spiders*, *fear of busy or open places*, *fear of confined spaces*)

Encourage students to try to identify three things that different people in their families might be afraid of or worried about and get them to think of an appropriate way to show sympathy.