

EVERYONE CAN WIN audio script edition

SKILL 3. Empathy

Part I

Podcast time codes:

Min/secs	Topic
9.23	Communication killers
17.09	Better listening
17.09	Listening to gather information
20.40	Listening to affirm the other person
32.11	Listening when someone's inflamed
35.27	Contributions conversations
42.21	Summary

**Relationship is about moving towards each other and
moving away from each other.**

**And if we're lucky,
we get to do that with someone
for thirty years or so.**

A wonderful teacher of mine, Julie Henderson said that and it's been on my notice board for years. Because it points to a fact I find personally comforting. No relationship is smooth sailing all of the time, even the best of them. We are constantly moving in and out of connection. But why?

This is skill number 3: Empathy.

We're continuing to dive into the skills for handling conflict constructively from the book, *Everyone can Win*. There's a lot to say on empathy and its ebbs and flows, so there are two episodes for this skill. This first part is about how we build a solid foundation for the relationship, and how we damage that, usually quite unconsciously. And how we can fix things when they've gone wrong.

#

They say we have empathy when we can put ourselves in the other person's shoes; understand their situation and their feelings and how things look from their perspective. In conflict this is critical! Relationship saving! If we take a little time to appreciate the context of the other person's experiences as well as their beliefs and their underlying good intentions, we *open* to the other person. If they *get it*, that we really do care about them, then they become more open to us too. That's our chance to turn it around.

Empathy is oil in the works of smooth communication. It doesn't fix a problem between you both, but it makes any problem easier to fix.

Can you think of someone who you would say is *really* empathic? ... What does it look like in *them*?

I'd bet they're not rigid. They generally can put their judgements to one side and open to other points of view, even if there's a bit of flack along the way. They're not held up by differences in race, religion or beliefs. They're compassionate. They genuinely care. If there's someone like that in your personal life you're really lucky! Let them be your role model!

When you think of someone you personally feel very open to... ask yourself: 'What's helping the empathy flow between us?' You may think 'Well, they're friendly'; 'They'll listen to my problems and tell me about theirs'; 'They don't put me down'; and 'They understand where I'm coming from'. You may both be at the same point of your path through life and can share experiences. Or you may both be passionate about the same thing – a strong interest or hobby that you can chat about together.

Whatever your point of connection is, you probably notice that you respect each other, you don't have to be perfect around them or overly formal. You can say to yourself: 'I can be myself with this person. I feel safe.'

All of that is empathy. And that's what, so often, takes a tumble once we're in conflict. So our challenge becomes: 'How do we maintain empathy whilst we're working through difficulties with each other?' Remember that initial quote:

***Relationship is about repeatedly moving towards each other and
moving away from each other.***

The climate of empathy between you and the other person is constantly shifting, like the weather. Say the other person does something really annoying or seems indifferent or disconnected. We'll turn away. There are going to be times when we make mistakes, or they do. Or when someone can't accept our ideas, our wishes, or our actions. We all tread on each other's toes and our empathy temporarily takes a nosedive.

Can you turn back towards them? You might need a quick chat with yourself along the lines of: 'I don't have to prove I'm right. I'm still a fine person, even if I've got something wrong. What can I do to sort this out?' or 'Yes, I'm cranky with them about *this* issue, but of course I still really care about them.' You are making a choice to keep that empathy doorway a little open. When we finally learn that a person's behaviour has more to do with their own internal struggle than with us we really master this empathy thing. And so often when we're cranky with them, it's about our private irritations. They're just busy being themselves.

When a relationship really lacks empathy, you can limp along with it, drop the relationship, or do something about fixing it. Of course, you won't want to fix every breakdown. But when you can't avoid the person, or you would lose out because the relationship is failing, it's worthwhile trying to improve the empathy flow between you.

So bring to mind someone you're presently having problems with? ... Independently of the problems themselves, would there be a benefit in working towards a better relationship with them?

HOW MIGHT YOU BUILD A BRIDGE?

Here are some tried and true methods you can use. Firstly:

Work on the relationship separately from the problem.

Find some safe conversation topics. Choose subjects that don't involve the problems you are having. What are the other person's interests? When do they most come alive? What excites them? Can you just hang out together for a bit? A good chat on a safe topic can be a great empathy builder. It's like, you're just listening to

the music of each other's voices, relaxing. You're not trying to fix anything. You're just establishing or re-establishing the flow between you, tuning-in to each other. The point is: it's warm, and not stressed.

Pick your time and place with care. Of course, if someone is in the middle of telling you their problem or something that matters to them, that is NOT the time to switch to small talk! That is listening time.

And vice versa. Don't try for a 'deep and meaningful' conversation when the other person is either too rushed or stressed to concentrate or you are somewhere you could be overheard and the conversation needs privacy.

Try **sharing an activity**. At work it might be going out together to check out a new piece of equipment; brainstorming a new project together; or having a working bee on reorganising the office. At home, try cooking or going for a walk or watching Netflix together. With a troubled friendship you might suggest an outing with them – maybe to a movie or a sports game. You don't have to make a big thing of it. Just take a step in the direction of empathy.

Empathy breakdowns with our own parents are a special case. We're hypersensitive to them. They can bring out the worst in us. We might be ruder to them than we'd ever be to anyone else. Our parents should be our core source of emotional support. Unfortunately some parents were never cut out for the role. They couldn't support you appropriately in your childhood and they can't do it now. Can we accept what is about them? And, is it possible their intention is actually loving and concerned, even if their personal issues get in the way?

Can you build your empathy bridge on that underlying good intention without letting yourself be hooked by the rest of their stuff? Look after yourself. Steer your conversations together towards non-sensitive issues, both yours and theirs. A bit of love can flow even if you're only able to talk to them about the most mundane things. And that helps you keep your heart open for your other relationships. You'll also be rewarded for any effort you put into improving empathy with a parent when you both have major issues that you must discuss.

If you really intend to build more bridges in all your relationships and in your life, you'll need to avoid:

THE COMMUNICATION KILLERS

We have lots of bad habits in the ways we talk to each other. It's much easier to spot the bad habit in the other person, than to look at our own. So let's start with others. Perhaps they just don't leave enough space for you to open up, because they're always holding the floor. When you're in the middle of telling them about your day, do they hijack the conversation and make it about themselves or their agenda. How do you feel then? Ignored and unheard?

Have you tried to tell someone how angry someone else has made you, only to hear back: 'There's nothing to be upset about'? Where does that leave you with your upset? Nowhere with that particular person! Your sense of empathy does an about-turn and marches off.

Perhaps the other person turns most of your conversations into a debate and always seems to be criticising your ideas. How do you feel then? Does your smile grow a bit fixed?

Unfortunately, we can easily provoke this type of *negative* reaction in the other person ourselves. We roll out some common stock phrase or say something glib and we're not really thinking about what we're saying. We close off or cool down a relationship, without even realising what we've done.

Listen to the following examples and consider if you use any of them yourself from time to time? They are common 'communication killers' that we regularly inflict on each other. Each of us will of course have our own particular variations. Here's the first one:

GIVING SOLUTIONS or ADVICE when the person just wants to be heard.

Listen to these examples:

'If you'd just be more organised, you wouldn't be in this panic.'

'Why didn't you do it this way?' 'Have you tried.....?'

'Just ignore them.'

Or 'Get over it!'

Do any of them sound familiar to you? If you've already offered several pieces of advice and all you hear back are 'Yes, buts...' it's time to take another tack

entirely. Turn off the advice! They're not ready to hear it. You think you're helping but you're obviously not.

Perhaps you REFUSE TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE

And it sounds like:

'There's nothing to discuss. I can't see your problem.'

Or you take the intellectual high ground and try to PERSUADE THEM WITH LOGIC

'There's nothing here to be upset about. You're being unreasonable.'

And we turn away or sidestep the issue by changing the topic. Sometimes of course, we just don't want to go there. But what if that's not really our deeper intention? If someone raises an issue they have with us, we really need to let them have their say, rather than shutting them down, if we value the relationship.

We do this one a lot. We REASSURE THE OTHER PERSON AND DISMISS THEIR CONCERNS

Watch for:

'Relax. Don't be nervous.'

'You'll be fine,'

'There's plenty more fish in the sea.'

'Time heals all wounds.'

Have you missed the opportunity to validate the other person's experience and to show you care about what they are going through?

Watch out if you start TELLING YOUR OWN STORY before you've given the other person enough time on theirs.

We use conversations to discharge some of our pent-up emotions. We can help each other in this, but not if we short-circuit the process. If they say 'I had a dreadful car accident last week...' it doesn't work if you jump straight in with: 'Well, let me tell you about mine.' Relationships are a two-way process. Each person needs roughly equal time. Don't hog the space!

Or, when someone starts talking about a disagreement with their spouse and you switch the attention onto yourself. 'You think that's bad? When I was with my

partner, it was even worse...’ Don’t try to top the other person’s bad experience with your own worse one. We each have our own journey and that’s what’s important.

You can swerve right into the path of conflict if you play the psychologist and start DIAGNOSING THEIR MOTIVES

‘You’re very possessive.’

‘You’ve always had a problem with motivation.’

If you’ve been on the receiving end, you’ll know how riled it makes you! Don’t diagnose! Move closer than the place from where you do that!

We have lots of habitual patterns that kill communication. We want someone to do something and we manipulate them with insincere praise. Or we withhold some relevant information. We might think we’ve been clever but if the outcome is not actually to their advantage, the other person will be pretty annoyed if they ever find out.

When we threaten, lay down the law or put the other person down we’ve shut all empathy right down and we’ll have quite a job ahead of us to fix that.

Do you recognise some of these communication killers? Have you recently done one or more of them yourself recently? Tag them as a ‘no-no’. Quickly counteract them if they slip out of your mouth by mistake. Polish up your empathy skills. And remember, it doesn’t hurt to apologise.

There’s one proviso here, however:

Your real communication is the *response* you get.

In other words, it’s how people *react* to your comment that counts. Even a doubtful communication *could* work out just fine, if it feels *supportive* to the person.

We communicate on so many levels and our words are only one of them. The tone of our voice is another. Our underlying positive regard for the other person is a third. People constantly interpret (and sometimes misinterpret) their relationship with you through many layers. No matter how good your words are, if they feel you don’t

respect them, then your communication has not been effective. Your real communication is the response you get.

Notice also if the other person does or says something that hasn't worked for you. Rather than letting empathy slide away, you might want to help *them* get a better response from *you*. You could start off with something like this: 'When you said I was worrying about nothing, I felt really put off, but I don't think that's what you intended.' Or 'When I'm upset, I don't need you to fix the problem. I really just want you to listen and try to understand me.'

When another person is not responding well to you, it's usually because they don't feel heard by you!

Hearing just happens, but listening is a choice

And poor listening habits can be very ingrained. Here are three distinct types of **Situations that need really good listening.**

We call them: information, affirmation and inflammation.

- **Firstly, when your purpose is to gain *information*:** there are important facts and details to be clarified. You need to get a full and clear picture from the other person.
- **Secondly, when your purpose is to give *affirmation*:** the other person really needs to be heard out on issues that are troubling them
- **Thirdly when there's *inflammation*,** the other person is furious with you.

These are all situations that demand your best listening skills. Let's get into some more details.

Say your purpose is to gain or clarify INFORMATION about the situation.

Don't let investigation become interrogation.

~~It may be~~ You may be looking into something as simple as why your kid came home with only one shoe from soccer practice. But perhaps you must investigate an accident where someone seriously injured or there's been sexual harassment, bullying or racial discrimination. If the other person feels scared of being blamed, getting the

information you need will never be easy. That subtle bond of empathy may be almost non-existent. People clam up, or lie or accuse others to protect themselves.

Our own judgemental attitudes fog our fact-finding even further and alienate the person being questioned. They should be able to see you as someone they can turn to when they are in difficulty. If this fact-finding mission turns into an interrogation, there will be permanent damage to the trust in this relationship.

Switch to listening mode and drop any pre-judgements or hidden or overt accusations. You just want to find out the details, be clear on instructions or get a sense of the whole picture. Non-verbally you need to use appropriate body language – nodding, noting, recording, watching. Concentrate, block out any distractions. Encourage the other person to be specific. You'll ask questions to get the facts – on timing, requirements, context, cost or whatever. Confirm with them that you've understood by repeating back key points and relevant detail. Be sure you both agree on the facts. It's the only listening situation where note-taking can help. It's generally best to stay with 'what', 'when', 'where', and 'how' questions. Almost any 'Why' question will send you down the hole of interrogation and make the other person defensive, you are questioning their reasoning.

What if your purpose in switching to some serious listening is AFFIRMATION?

You're trying to support the other person with an issue they have? They seem to want to talk it through with you, so you're just giving them the space to do so. If the other person seems withdrawn after something you've said, drop your own agendas and start listening more attentively.

If you can listen really well, they'll understand better how the problem is affecting them. Often, that's all they need. They really don't want advice from you.

Occasionally you might repeat back something they've just said if you want to check that you really understand them. Or perhaps you say a *little* more, just enough to encourage the other person to keep the flow going. The key is to show a caring interest. You don't have to fix it! Just give them the airtime in the conversation.

Sometimes you will only need to do that quite briefly and then the conversation rolls on quite smoothly. Sometimes you will need to keep the focus totally on the other person for quite a while. So stay flexible and respond to what's needed this time.

You show your concern for what's happening for them – even if you disagree or privately think their behaviour unjustified. You reserve your judgement and drop the normal give-and-take of conversation just for a while. Like changing gears, it's a significant shift.

So check: Are you really listening or just waiting for your turn to speak?

If your own thoughts, feelings or reactions creep in, re-focus on the other person.

Don't work out what to say on your own behalf, at least for now.

Consider the responsibilities you are taking on when you really listen well. You're so focused on how it is for the other person that you aren't judging them at all. For that time you're on the *inside* of their problem with them. You're digesting their experience with them. You'll listen to more than just the words. Tone of voice and body language will tell you quite as much, sometimes more than the words themselves. Giving them your best attention invites them to continue. People will often tell you very personal things if they do decide to open up to you. You may need to reassure them that you will respect their privacy. And do so! It's the only way you'll be trusted again.

When we're listening well, we're listening with the heart as well as the head and we're tuning in to their whole context, how it all is for them.

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SHAUN

Shaun told our group about flipping over to just listening with his mother recently. His father was in hospital for some fairly routine surgery. His mother seemed anxious. Shaun said he'd tried several times to reassure her that all would be well, when it dawned on him that his words weren't dispelling her concerns. All he was doing was shutting her down.

The next time she told him she was anxious, he put his own thoughts aside and shifted into really listening - just with a gesture, inviting her to say more about that. She began to talk about her concerns for her husband's overall health and the real possibility of his death and what that might mean for her and for the family.

It was one of the most bonding conversations Shaun and his mother had ever had together. That shift to really listening had made all the difference!

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The type of careful listening Shaun did with his mum is often called Active Listening.

Here are some 'How to' hints for good ACTIVE LISTENING

You've focused your attention totally on the speaker. You're not talking about yourself, or adding any well-intentioned comments.

What do you say?

Very little. Mainly you'll find yourself just nodding your head or putting in an occasional 'mm'. From time to time, in your own words, you *might* reflect back what you understand they're trying to say. But make it a question inviting confirmation, rather than a statement. 'Are you saying that ...?' Or 'Have I got this right? You were really hurt when...' You're encouraging them to correct you if necessary.

You're feeding back to them their feelings as you've understood them, and perhaps a very brief summary of some important fact they've mentioned. If it's appropriate in the relationship, you could probe a little. 'How do you feel about that?' or 'You sound upset. How did that affect you?'

You don't have to pretend that you have understood if you haven't. You can certainly say: 'Can you explain that to me again?'

It's important to allow pauses in the conversation.

There's a natural shift that occurs when someone names something well for themselves. But that shift takes a bit of time to unfold. Even if there's a long silence, don't fill it in. Don't change topics. Just wait quietly. If after the pause, you sense a change in their energy, you might gently ask: 'How does it all seem to you now?'

Don't advise, diagnose, or criticize.

While you're in active listening mode, avoid changing, challenging or improving what they've said. And as Shaun learnt in the previous story, it's also not the time to reassure or cheer them up. You want their inner exploration to continue, not be mopped up by your well-intentioned comments. Try not to ask too many fact-finding questions either. But it might be OK to hand them tissues!

The process itself does the work, and better than you can.

When they really focus on what they are experiencing and they name it well, magic happens. Their understanding shifts of its own accord. If it's a problem that needs a solution, they're likely to find it themselves once their understanding grows. And that will be the solution they are willing to act on.

When active listening is going well, you appear to be doing very little at all. You may be saying nothing for a long time. But you're offering your presence and caring while they do their inner exploration. And that's doing a lot. People rarely get listened to really well. Don't think ahead about what you will say next. Let them take the lead. And when they're ready, they'll move on to the next part of their problem..

Falling off the rails

When active listening is going well it's like a train travelling smoothly on a track. With the best of intent, we will sometimes say or do something that derails it. Sometimes you say something and it doesn't go down well. Perhaps you changed topics when they weren't ready to leave the issue. Perhaps you've started advising. Apologise and help them get back on track.

Sometimes the person may start drifting off the topic to less significant, safer, matters. Let that be their choice. They'll get back to it when they're ready and that might be after five minutes of lighter chat or they may not be ready to go any further

today. If you've done your active listening well, you will both exit with more empathy for each other. The other person feels safe to be themselves with you and your understanding of them grows.

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SARAH

She told us that she and her husband Paul have a good, supportive relationship. But it was really tested when his business went through a very rough patch. He and Sarah talked together every day about what the best next steps would be. She felt that it was great to be able to support him like that. They were a real team, she felt. Then one evening he told her that Lizette, an old girlfriend of his, had rung him that day. She was offering to work with him and help build up the business again. Paul asked Sarah whether she thought he should take up Lizette's offer. She knew Lizette. She was very competent and experienced, but Sarah wasn't at all sure of her motives toward Paul. Was she still after him?

She'd loved to have said, 'Tell her to go away!' She didn't want Paul employing an old girlfriend. But the whole thing was very touchy. If she demanded that Paul didn't employ Lizette, how would he react? He might do the opposite, or blame her jealousy for his business going further downhill. The one thing she could see was that she dared not give any sort of advice.

So instead she asked Paul: 'What factors would you want to look at before you could make a decision?' He soon realised he needed to know what Lizette's real expectations were. So, he organised a meeting

with her. Paul told Sarah about it afterwards. He said Lizette had come along to the meeting 'seduction incorporated' - the perfect make-up, the tight dress, the sexy glances. Paul said he could see that work was only an excuse for what was really on her mind. That was exactly as Sarah suspected, but it seemed to her a very good time to just say nothing and keep listening.

That proved to be a smart move, because then Paul announced he'd already rejected Lizette's offer! Needless to say, Sarah was hugely relieved! She'd left Paul making all his own decisions. And she'd stuck to her role of just being his sounding-board.

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So we've looked at where good listening will serve you well in *two* types of situations: gathering *information* and providing *affirmation, or support*. There's a third situation: when the other person is really angry with us.

To respond to INFLAMMATION, stop!

You need to quickly shift gears into listening mode! Your first and foremost job is to let them know you've heard them. Really listen to their accusations and how strongly they feel about it. This is not you agreeing, this is you listening to them.

The point is that they need to understand that you really do know *how* angry they are with you and *why*. At the height of their anger, telling them to calm down or explaining yourself will just inflame them further. Here's the thing! When they feel heard, really heard, they will come off the boil.

Your body language here is crucial. Face the other person. Don't cringe. Keep those hands *off* your hips. Yes, it's quite a challenge when you're under attack. **You will need to stay stable, centred:** briefly focus your attention in your belly, and breathe into that spot. Consider where your feet are. Can you get both of them on the ground? Breathe as calmly as you can.

Be seen to be really listening to what they are saying. And keep it going until they're finished. Don't retaliate or justify. At least once, confirm and summarise the gist of what they're saying. You are not agreeing, you are showing that you've taken onboard the message they're delivering. You might say: 'I can see how much this matters to you' 'No wonder you are so upset if you thought that was my attitude.'

Your responses should *not* sound like you are unconcerned. Stay emotionally present. Indicate that you've understood – a clear 'yes', or a strong "OK" or 'Oh!' Show that you're acknowledging their feelings. You might also need to ask a few questions to better understand the cause of the problem.

It's so tempting to go into counterattack. You might do it to justify yourself, or to top their accusations with some of your own. But defending or attacking at the peak of their anger will only inflame them further. Listening is your most effective way to soothe them down. Let them get out all they need to. Show them you've taken in exactly what they're saying. Then they may be able to hear your perspective. But if try and they heat up again, go straight back to listening. It may take a few rounds before you are both able to talk together more calmly about the underlying issues.

#

So here's where we are so far. You're building empathy bridges, so it's easy to move towards each other when everything's smooth between you both. And so that, when there are conflicts and you back away, you don't seriously damage the underlying relationship.

- Share activities that you can both just enjoy together, setting any problems aside for a while.
- Avoid those communication killers so you don't unwittingly shut the other person down.
- Switch quickly to good listening whenever you need to collect information, affirm the other person's distress or concern, or when the other person is inflamed and their anger is directed at you.

What else does empathy need? We need a bridge repair kit for when things have gone wrong. We've argued and now there's emotional distance between us. You need to be able to:

- Acknowledge the contributions *you* have made to the problem!

A simple way to say that is that ‘take your share of the blame’. But blaming yourself or the other person only worsens the problem. So:

WE NEED TO SHIFT FROM ‘BLAME’ TO ‘CONTRIBUTIONS’.

Reframe arguments about ‘Who’s to blame?’ into conversations about ‘What are the contributions?’ It’s always worthwhile considering how you’ve played some part in creating the problem, especially if up to now you’ve been acting like it’s all the other person’s fault. That way, you’re exploring the whole story, not just its surface issue.

For example:

Getting it wrong: you’re blaming an employee for not passing on some vital information.

Getting it right: Look at how you have you contributed to the issue perhaps by appearing too busy to be interrupted.

We get it wrong when we: shift all the blame onto others

And we also get it wrong when we: absorb all the blame ourselves.

Around Blame: don’t be a shifter and don’t be an absorber!

Neither is likely to be accurate. Conflicts are rarely caused by only one person.

Getting it right is starting a **contributions conversation**. Sometimes you’ll need time to reflect on the flareup and have your contributions conversation later when the heat of the argument has cooled. A contributions conversation can help you repair and deepen the relationship.

You might start one with something like: ‘I can see that I have contributed to this by...’ As the other person sees you wearing some of the responsibility the climate between you improves.

We might choose to apologise for the bits of the problem that we are responsible for. An honest apology will often repair the bridge between us. As we take responsibility for our contributions, we find we are more forgiving too.

Perhaps they will reciprocate and consider their own role in the problem. If they can manage that, that’s when the real power of a good ‘contributions’

conversation shows up. After the dust has settled, it's a way to clear the air. You may not have fixed many of the issues, but you've aired your withholds in a mutually supportive way. You each focus on your own contributions to the issue, and you leave the other person to think about theirs, when and if they're ready. It gives you both the opportunity to plan how to prevent similar problems arising in the future.

#

This happened with David

He'd recently divorced and was now living with Deborah, together with her children from her previous marriage. So it was complex!

He told me that his twelve-year-old daughter, Zoë also spent every second weekend with them, but that had become a nightmare. Zoë and Deborah's ten-year-old, daughter, were always bickering. They seemed to be jealous of each other and constantly competing over everything.

Another fight had exploded in the girls' bedroom and by the time David came on the scene, they were screaming at each other. When he tried to find out what was going on, Zoë turned on him and yelled: 'I hate you. You always take her side.' Then she ran out the front door, slamming it in his face when he tried to follow her. David said he was really alarmed and thought, 'If I don't do something *right now*, Zoë' could get herself lost.'" So he ran down the street after her. Drama indeed!

He called out, "Slow down, if you run off now, we won't be able to sort this out." It did work. She turned around and he managed to catch

up to her. Tears were streaming down her face and between sobs she accused him of loving his new family more than her.

He realised there was no point in defending himself or telling her off. She was too distressed and angry to hear him. So he just apologised for not giving her enough attention - and how wrong that was as she was his very own daughter. He told her how very special she was to him. He took responsibility for his part of the problem: that he'd let himself get too busy trying to make everyone happy.

That seemed to give her the courage to speak more frankly. She blurted out that she felt like an outsider in his new family. They both agreed that they should have talked much sooner about how the new arrangement would be for her.

Once she knew that he'd really heard her, and he'd owned up to his contribution to her problems and that he wasn't about to criticise her, she calmed down. And he asked her what he could do to make it easier for her now. They decided they needed some special father-daughter time together - just the two of them.

They went back into the house and let the others know they were going out together for a walk.

As they strolled down to the beach, they explored some practical changes that would make it better for her when she stayed with him. They were getting back to how they used to be with each other - honest about the issues and able to talk things through.

HERE'S A SUMMARY OF THE EMPATHY SKILLS WE'VE DISCUSSED IN THIS EPISODE

When the relationship is tense, you may be able to build a bridge with some *safe conversations or a shared activity*.

- *Avoid the communication killers:* They're bad habits that shut the other person down. Don't dismiss their concerns or sidestep the issue. Don't hog the space – each person deserves their time on centre stage. Don't diagnose their motives, or take the intellectual high ground when strong emotions are involved.

Your real communication is the response you get.

How people react to your comments is what counts.

- *Listening* is your go-to technique for gathering information, supporting and affirming another person's distress or concerns, and for responding to inflammation when someone is angry with you.
- *A contributions conversation* can repair a damaged bridge between us. It can soften the tensions during or after conflict. Take responsibility for your part of the problem. It may go further and help you clear the air with each other as you build a picture together of the factors that have contributed to the problem. It moves you both away from blame and towards mutual problem-solving.

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If you want more written material about all this, there's lots of extra reading and training resources on our website, Conflict Resolution Network. Our headquarters are at crnhq.org.

In the next audio, Part II of Empathy, we'll explore how to understand why other people seem so different and how we can learn to accept that. It's another skill that oils the works of good relationship.