

Being an Empathy Buddy

The New York Center for Nonviolent Communication • www.nycnvc.org

An Empathy Buddy is a unique and revolutionary relationship created to develop the practice of Compassionate or Nonviolent Communication (NVC) with a Buddy. In this handout you'll discover how an "Empathy Buddy Chat" works, why Buddy Chats can make both your lives more wonderful, and how you can start or perhaps improve your Empathy Buddy relationship.

How the Empathy Buddy Practice Works

1. In an Empathy Buddy Chat, the Listener focuses on the Feelings and Needs of the Speaker.

Empathy for another person is being fully present to that other person: checking in with what they're Feeling, what's alive for them in that moment.

Empathy Buddies practice Empathy skills. They form a unique and revolutionary relationship in which they agree to:

- give and receive Empathy equally
- do it in a safe, non-judgmental, and respectful environment

Unlike typical back-and-forth, chit-chat conversation, the Listener does not give advice or sympathy but focuses solely on hearing and guessing the **Feelings** and **Needs** of the speaker, sometimes called an **Empathy Guess**: "Are you feeling X because you need Y"?

2. Empathy Buddy Chats enhance NVC skills.

Empathy Buddies report that their chats really help them with their NVC awareness and skills by:

- integrating what they've already learned
- giving them confidence to take these skills out into the "real world" with greater ease
- developing fluency in the meanings of the various words that define our Feelings and Needs
- connecting to oneself and understanding of Needs or life energy

3. How do Empathy Buddy Chats make life more wonderful?

In addition to the NVC skills themselves, Empathy Buddies have discovered that regular chats and the relationship itself may help them to:

- reduce stress
- change the direction of their life by rediscovering their Feelings and Needs
- develop inner stillness, presence and awareness
- shift away from the habitual to greater awareness in thinking, listening, and speaking
- improve their relationships
- receive support while going through life's changing experiences
- develop solutions based on Needs more life serving

4. Empathy Buddy Session — The Steps

Setting It Up

Make some agreements about timing, schedule, preferences, flexibility, confidentiality, as well as when and how you will evaluate how your Empathy Buddy relationship is going.

Pre-Chat

- Before chatting, take a few minutes to reflect on what’s “alive” in you or a “triggering event” that you’d like to share and receive support for.
- Perhaps take a few breaths or use another centering technique.
- Have the intention to give and receive Empathy, to support each other’s growth and learning. (If you begin to lose touch with this intention, call for a pause.)
- Together Buddies determine the schedule for the call (how much time for sharing, check-out, etc.). This can be negotiated each time or you can establish a pattern you use when you meet.

Check-In

- Each Empathy Buddy does two things to check in:
 - briefly (1 to 2 minutes) shares a little bit about what’s going on for them and how they’re Feeling in the moment
 - identifies their time availability for the session
- Decide who speaks first based on their Empathy capacity in that moment.

Sharing (set a timer to ensure equal time for each person)

This is where you will spend the bulk of your time, divided between both Buddies. When Buddy B is the Speaker, Buddy A is the Listener, and then the roles are reversed.

Speaker’s Task

- The Speaker begins by sharing what’s going on in their life they would like empathy for.
- During the sharing, the Speaker may ask the Listener to offer guesses about the Speaker’s current Feelings and Needs: “Are you feeling _____ because you need _____?” or “Do you feel _____ because your need for _____ isn’t being met how you would prefer?” or “Is your need for _____ being met and you feel _____ about that?”
- The Speaker might also ask the Listener for a Reflection, which is when the Listener offers back to the Speaker what they heard in their own words. This can help identify what is central to the Speaker’s experience (most activating or most enriching).
- The Speaker receives Empathy Guesses and/or a Reflection, slows down, and checks in before responding with something like “Yes, that really resonates” or “No, but it’s more like...” in order to gain clarity.
- To better uncover Feelings and Needs, the Speaker may want to allow themselves to go to “jackal” or judging mode. For example: “They were horrible and wrong, and I hate them, and they should have....”
- The Speaker may ask for a short pause at the end to assimilate the experience before changing places with the Listener and may state: “I’m complete for now.”

Listener’s Task

- The Listener stays in the flow of being present to the changing Feelings and Needs as the Speaker talks.
- In a phone chat where visible body language isn’t available, the Listener may indicate their

presence by “mmm,” “ahhh,” etc., if the Speaker finds this supportive.

- The Listener lets go of having to achieve the “perfect Empathy Guess” and focuses on helping the Speaker gain clarity and understanding about their Feelings and Needs. (It’s reassuring that Marshall Rosenberg said that his guesses were off at least 50% of the time!)
- Some Listeners want to take notes to stay focused on the Feelings and Needs. Please ask for permission to do this in advance and make an agreement about what will be done with notes (destroyed, shared between Buddies, etc.).
- The Listener may ask the Speaker at the end: “Are you complete?”

Check Out (set a timer to ensure you keep to agreements you have about timing)

- At the end of the session review it to identify Needs met, what worked, what didn’t, celebrations, mournings, and/or note any internal shifts.
- What worked might become an [NVC Appreciation](#): (“I really appreciated when you...that met my need for ...”).
- What didn’t work might become an opportunity for an [NVC Mourning](#): (“I regret I was not as focused as I’d like to be because I value or want to...”).
- If there’s a misunderstanding, [NVC Connection Requests](#) may help.
- When requesting a change, practice using an [NVC Request with Connection](#).
- Buddies set the time for the next call.

Tips for Empathy Buddy Chats

- ***Start on time*** — If you find that you’re starting late, it might or might not be a signal that something is not working.
- ***Use a Timer*** — When one person takes up more time, the relationship won’t work well (add Needs: sustainability, balance). Timers help keep balance.
- ***Be Honest*** — Tell your Buddy what is working and what is not. This is the basis of all close relationships. If something comes up and you want to end the call, honor that, share it, and take action to meet your Needs.
- ***Distant Buddies*** — If possible, choose a Buddy outside your circle of friends and community. This encourages the ease of intimacy and promotes a safe environment for your chat.
- ***Stick to Empathy*** — If you want to offer something other than Empathy or want to have a regular conversation, ask if they’re open to it before breaking out of Empathy Mode or request this at the end of the session. It can also be helpful to familiarize yourself with [Empathy Blockers](#) so you can readily distinguish an empathic posture from other ways we interact with each other.
- ***Relationships are Unique*** — Some Buddies meet weekly, others monthly. Find a schedule that works best for you and your Buddy. Some people have one Buddy. Others have several Buddies. Some chat by phone, others use Skype, FaceTime, or Zoom. Some days, you give equal time; other days vary depending on Needs.
- ***Change Happens*** — Some people keep the same Buddy for years. Others change Buddies as their skill level, time availability and interests change. Check in with yourself and your Buddy to see how the relationship is working.