

Empathy vs. Pity

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“As a father pities his children,
So the Lord pities those who fear Him.”
(Psalm 103:13)

Another word that is often confused with empathy is “pity.” The dictionary definition of pity is “sympathy or sorrow evoked by another’s suffering or distress.” Certainly, pity can be good and appropriate when it is paired with empathy and compassion. However, pity can also be used as judgment, which will create distance in relationship rather than communicate connection and care.

No doubt, many of us have been on the receiving end of unhealthy pity that feels condescending and humiliating. If you have ever made a silly mistake in front of the wrong person, a “bless your heart” spoken with a long, southern drawl can actually feel more like “I can’t believe you’re so stupid” and make you want to crawl into a hole. In that situation, pity is the last thing you want.

Pity is harmful when it is spoken from a 1-up/1-down position, where the person presents themselves as superior or better than another person. The one who is being pitied in this way will feel to be “less than” the one offering pity. This kind of pity can reduce people to objects of our care that makes them feel like disempowered victims.

Harmful pity can be prevented with genuine empathy. If mutual understanding is established first, pity will feel more like identifying and connection than judgment and humiliation. The key is to remain separate, but not superior, in an effort to relationally connect before we materially help.

Stephen Covey is famous for saying, “Seek first to understand.”
Before pity comes empathy...so pity doesn’t turn into judgment.