The Wholistic Empathy (WE): A Way of Being

Rooted in the Empathy Circle Practice
Developed by Edwin Rutsch

Overview

Because empathy is defined in many different—and often conflicting—ways, Edwin Rutsch created the **Wholistic Empathy Definition Model** to bring greater clarity to the question of how empathy is defined. The model is grounded and builds on the work of Carl Rogers, who described empathy as sensing into the experiences of others.

The Wholistic Empathy Model is grounded in the lived experience of the Empathy Circle practice. An Empathy Circle is a simple yet powerful structure for practicing empathy. In small groups of four to seven people, participants take turns speaking and listening while reflecting back each other's meaning and understanding. Through this shared process, empathy unfolds naturally in layers — from self-awareness, to understanding others, to mutual resonance, and finally to share action.

At its core, the Wholistic Empathy (WE) Model begins with the Empathy Circle. It names and defines the distinct personal experiences that arise within this practice. The Empathy Circle is both the foundation and embodiment of the Wholistic Empathy Model — the space where empathy becomes a way of being, not just an individual act. From this foundation, we can bring the understanding, spirit and skills of empathy into every part of our lives.

Wholistic Empathy is multi-faceted. By placing it in the context of the Empathy Circle, we move from abstract definitions to *lived experience*. Anyone who takes part in an Empathy Circle can directly sense, explore, and name the different dimensions of an empathic way of being. In its broader sense, empathy is a way of being in relationship with life itself. Grounded in the practice of the Empathy Circle, this model views empathy as:

- Sensing into life with presence, openness, and care.
- Listening deeply rather than being judgmental, indifferent, detached, or domineering.
- Attuning to experiences and meaning within ourselves, others, and our relationships.

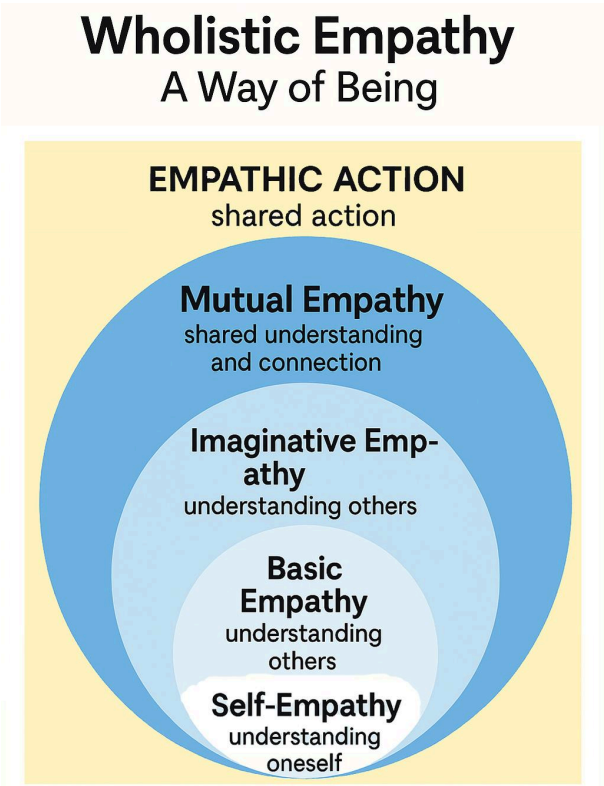
Why Define Empathy in the Context of an Empathy Circle?

The word ‘Empathy’ can feel abstract, but the Empathy Circle offers a concrete way to experience it. Through structured dialogue, participants can directly sense and practice the different facets of empathy—bringing clarity to what it means to live empathically, both individually and together. This way we can more clearly point to actual experiences that happen and name them. Anyone can take part in an Empathy Circle and can personally experience the different facets of an empathic way of being.

The Five Facets of Wholistic Empathy (In Brief)

(As experienced and enacted in the Empathy Circle)

The **Wholistic Empathy Model** is a way of being comprised of five interconnected facets:



1. **Self-Empathy:** The inner foundation.
2. **Basic Empathy:** The interpersonal bridge.
3. **Imaginative Empathy:** Imaginative role playing
4. **Mutual Empathy**: The shared connection and understanding within a group.
5. **Empathic Action:** Mutually agreed action

The Five Facets of Wholistic Empathy (Detailed)

1. Self-Empathy — Sensing Into and Understanding Oneself

1. **What it is:**
   Moment-to-moment awareness of one's own experiences (feelings, thoughts, meanings, desires, needs, etc.)

2. **How it appears in the circle:**
   a. The moment-to-moment awareness of one's own experiences (feelings, thoughts, meanings, desires, etc.) The practice of turning inward to identify and acknowledge your own feelings and needs *as they arise* while you are both speaking and listening. It is the foundational self-connection that must precede authentic connection with others
   b. As speakers share, they often gain new awareness of their own inner world.
   c. The reflective rhythm of the circle slows communication, allowing participants to hear themselves more clearly.
   d. The safety of being deeply listened to fosters authenticity and self-connection.

3. **Why it matters:**
   a. Self-empathy cultivates emotional grounding and presence. Participants often say, *"I didn't realize what I was feeling until I said it here."*
   b. When we understand ourselves, we can better understand others.

2. Basic Empathy — Sensing Into and Understanding Others

1. **What it is:**
   a. Basic Empathy is the capacity to perceive and understand the feelings and experiences of another person — to "walk beside" them in their world, as Carl Rogers described.
   b. A moment-to-moment sensing into the experiences (feelings, thoughts, meanings, desires, etc.) of others. This is what Carl Rogers called empathy.
   c. When we listen to others we see our common humanity.
   d. A deep quality of presence and listening.

2. **How it appears in the Empathy Circle:**
   a. *In an Empathy Circle: shown when the Active Listener listens closely to the Speaker.*
   b. The listener focuses full attention on understanding the speaker's meaning.
   c. Reflection ensures the speaker feels heard and understood.
   d. This active feedback loop creates a tangible sense of connection.

3. **Why it matters:**
   Basic empathy is the heart of the Empathy Circle — the living exchange of presence, understanding, and care between people.

3. Imaginative Empathy — Imaginative Role Taking

1. **What it is:**
   a. Imaginative Empathy is the ability to use curiosity and imagination to explore perspectives different from our own — to imagine what another might be experiencing.
   b. Can be applied in limitless contexts. We can imagine ourselves as anyone or anything.

2. **How it appears in the circle:**
   a. In an Empathy Circle: shown during role-playing, such as practicing conflict situations in training and taking on the role of being another person.
   b. Imaginative Empathy is not often used in the Empathy Circle

3. **Why it matters:**
   Imaginative empathy expands our capacity for creativity and innovation. It helps bridge divides by allowing participants to *see through each other's eyes*.

4. Mutual Empathy — Shared Understanding and Connection

1. **What it is**
   a. Awareness of the overall quality and level of empathy within a relationship, family, group, or society.
   b. Mutual Empathy is the *reciprocal flow* of empathy that develops within the group — when each person is both listening and being listened to, understanding and being understood.
   c. It is empathy as a **shared relationship** rather than a one-way act.

2. **How it appears in the circle:**
   a. Mutual Empathy is shown when participants listen deeply to each other, raising the level of mutual empathy in the group.

b. Often people complain that they empathize with people but do not get empathy in return. In the Empathy Circle everyone listens and has the opportunity to speak and be heard. This is the empathic mutuality of the Circle.
c. As empathy circulates between participants, mutual trust, care, openness and emotional safety deepen.
d. A shared empathic "field" or feeling arises — participants feel connected to each other and the group as a whole.
e. The circle becomes an ecosystem of understanding, where everyone contributes to and benefits from empathy.

3. **Why it matters:**
   a. Mutual Empathy transforms individual understanding into collective resonance. It's the social and cultural dimension of empathy — the seed of an empathic community.

5. Empathic Action — Acting from Shared Understanding

1. **What it is:**
   a. Empathic Action is the natural outgrowth of mutual understanding. When empathy flows freely within and among people, collaborative and innovative action emerges.

2. **How it appears in the circle:**
   a. In Restorative Empathy Circles, once people understand each other, they co-create solutions that address everyone's needs.
   b. In community or organizational settings, empathy circles lay the foundation for cooperation, innovation, and shared decision-making.
   c. Participants often feel motivated to continue empathic collaboration beyond the circle.
   d. The Empathy Circle itself forms an empathic action and has many benefits.

3. **Why it matters:**
   a. Empathy is complete when it moves into the world as mutual and caring action — transforming relationships, communities, and systems through shared understanding and intention.
   b.