

Ministering Principles

DEVELOPING THE EMPATHY TO MINISTER

Ministering is lifting. We can lift others as we try to understand what they are experiencing and show that we are willing to walk with them.

Because our Heavenly Father wants us to become like Him, the challenges we face in this life can become learning opportunities if we will trust Him and stay on the path. Unfortunately, staying on the path can be particularly hard when we feel like we're facing those trials on our own.

But we were never meant to walk the path alone. The Savior achieved perfect empathy, descending below all things so that He would know how to succor us in our afflictions and infirmities (see Alma 7:11–12; Doctrine and Covenants 122:8). He expects each of us to follow His example and show empathy as well. Every member of the Church has covenanted to “mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9). In spite of our own challenges, we are taught throughout the scriptures to turn outward and “lift up the hands which hang down, and [strengthen] the feeble knees” and to “make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way” (Hebrews 12:12–13; see also Isaiah 35:3–4; Doctrine and Covenants 81:5–6).

As we take others by the hand, let them lean on us, and walk with them, we help them stay on the path long enough for the Savior not only to convert them—one of the



key purposes of ministering—but also to heal them (see Doctrine and Covenants 112:13).

What Is Empathy?

Empathy is understanding another person’s feelings, thoughts, and condition from their perspective, rather than our own.¹ Being empathetic is important in our efforts to minister to others.

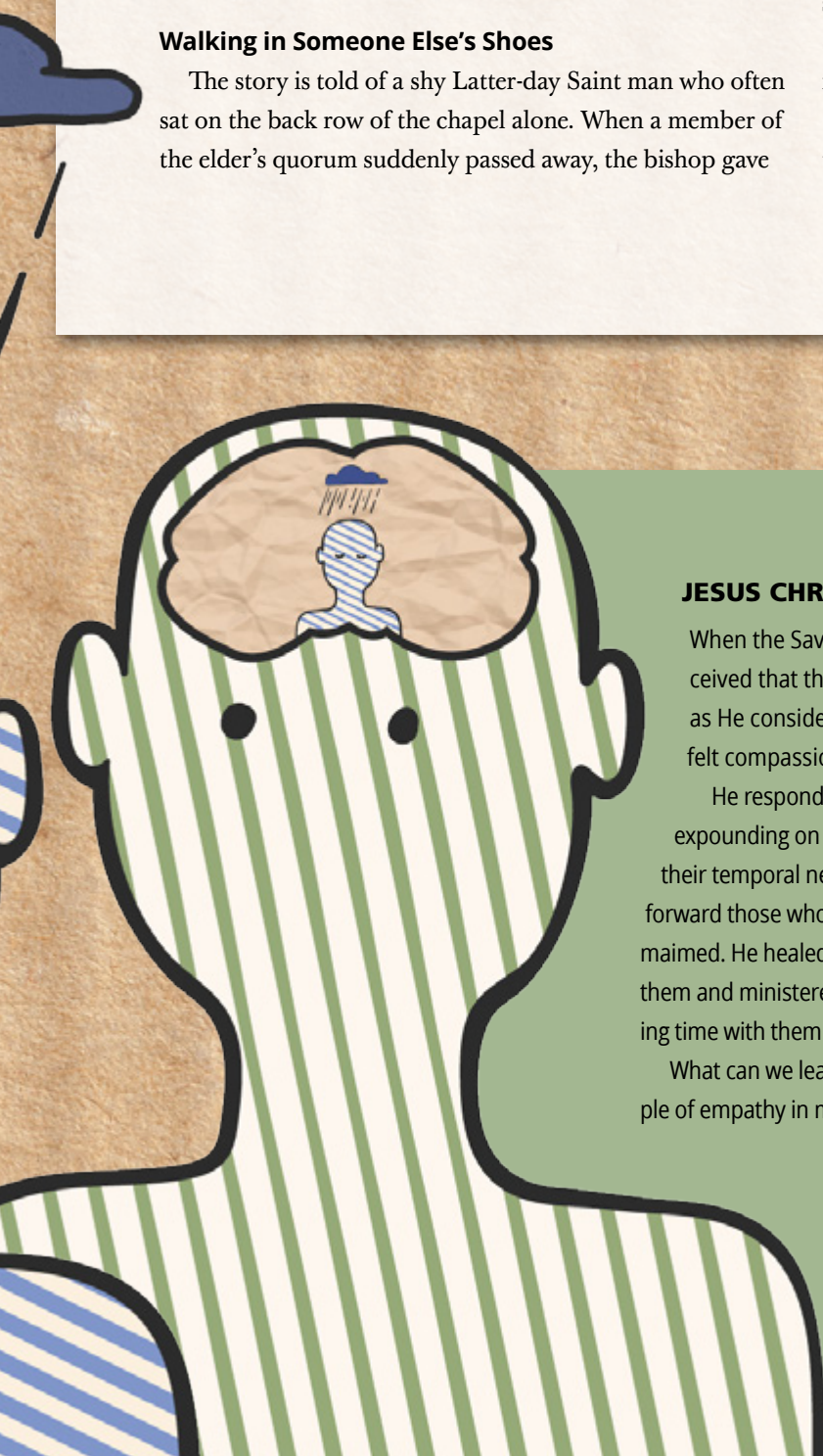
Walking in Someone Else’s Shoes

The story is told of a shy Latter-day Saint man who often sat on the back row of the chapel alone. When a member of the elder’s quorum suddenly passed away, the bishop gave

priesthood blessings to comfort the elder’s family members. Relief Society sisters brought in food. Well-meaning friends and neighbors visited with the family and said, “Let us know if there is anything we can do to help.”

But when this shy man visited the family later in the day, he rang the doorbell and when the widow answered, he simply said, “I have come to clean your shoes.” In a couple of hours, all the family’s shoes were cleaned and shined in preparation for the funeral. The following Sunday the family of the deceased elder sat by the shy man on the back row.

Here was a man who was able to fill an unmet need. Both they and he were blessed by his empathy-guided ministering.



JESUS CHRIST MINISTERED WITH EMPATHY

When the Savior appeared to the Nephites, He taught them until He perceived that they could not understand everything He had to teach them. But as He considered them, He knew that they didn’t want Him to leave, and He felt compassion for them. (See 3 Nephi 17:5–6.)

He responded by shifting from expounding on the gospel to ministering to their temporal needs, inviting them to bring forward those who were sick, lame, blind, or maimed. He healed them. Then He prayed for them and ministered to their children, spending time with them individually to bless them.

What can we learn from the Savior’s example of empathy in ministering to the Nephites?



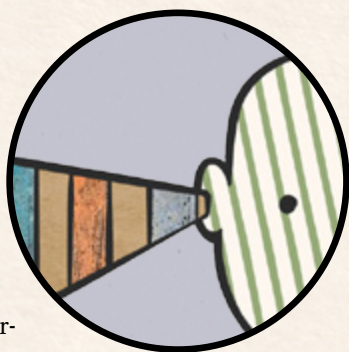
Can I Develop Empathy?

Some seem to be blessed with the gift to be able to empathize. But for those who struggle, there is good news. Over the past 30 years, a growing number of researchers have studied empathy. While many of them come at the topic with different approaches, most of them agree that empathy is something that can be learned.²

We can pray for the gift of empathy. In order to improve, it is also helpful to have a better understanding of how empathy works. The following suggestions are generally accepted as basic elements of empathy.³ While these often take place without us even being conscious that they are happening, being aware of them gives us a chance to see opportunities to improve.

1. Understand

Empathy requires some understanding of another's situation. The better we understand their circumstances, the easier it becomes to understand how they feel about it and what we can do to help.



Actively listening, asking questions, and counseling with them and others are important actions for understanding their situation. Learn more about these concepts in previous Ministering Principles articles:

- “Five Things Good Listeners Do,” *Ensign*, June 2018, 6.
- “Counsel about Their Needs,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2018, 6.
- “Getting Help to Help Others,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2018, 6.

As we seek to understand, we must take time to understand their specific situation rather than making assumptions based on another who had a similar experience. Otherwise, we may miss the mark and leave them feeling misunderstood.

2. Imagine

In our efforts to keep our covenant to mourn with those who mourn and comfort those who stand in need of comfort, we can pray for the Holy Ghost to help us understand what someone might be feeling and how we can help.⁴



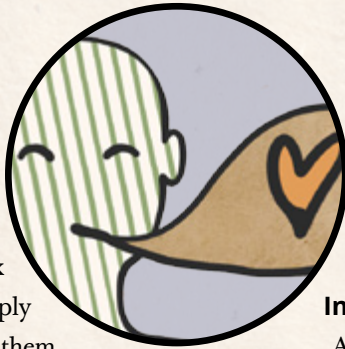
Once we understand someone's circumstances, each of us—whether it happens naturally or not—can go through the exercise of imagining what we would think or feel in that situation. Understanding those thoughts and emotions, along with the guidance of the Holy Ghost, can help guide our response to their situation.

As we come to understand another's circumstances and imagine how they might feel, it is important that we are careful that we don't judge them inappropriately (see Matthew 7:1). Being critical of how someone got into their situation can lead you to discount the pain the situation is causing.

3. Respond

How we respond is important because that is how our empathy shows. There are countless ways to communicate our understanding both verbally and nonverbally. It's important to remember that our goal isn't necessarily to fix the problem. Often the goal is simply to lift and to strengthen by letting them know they're not alone. This might mean saying, "I'm so glad you told me" or "I'm so sorry. That must hurt."

In every case our response must be genuine. And when appropriate, being vulnerable enough to let others see your own weaknesses and insecurities can create a valuable sense of connection.



Invitation to Act

As you consider the circumstances of those you minister to, imagine being in their situation and what you would find most helpful if you were in their shoes. Pray to understand how they feel and follow through. Your response may be simple, but it may be more meaningful. ■

Ministering Principles articles are intended to help us learn to care for one another—not to be shared as messages during visits. As we come to know those we serve, the Holy Ghost will prompt us to know what message they might need in addition to our care and compassion.



NOTES

1. See William Ickes, ed., *Empathic Accuracy* (1997); and Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (2000).
2. See, for example, Emily Teding van Berkhout and John M. Malouff, "The Efficacy of Empathy Training: A Meta-analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 63, no. 1 (Jan. 2016), 32–41.
3. See, for example, Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't)* (2008); Theresa Wiseman, "A Concept Analysis of Empathy," *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 23, no. 6 (June 1996), 1162–67; and Ed Neukrug and others, "Creative and Novel Approaches to Empathy: A Neo-Rogerian Perspective," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Jan. 2013), 29–42.
4. See Henry B. Eyring, "The Comforter," *Ensign*, May 2015, 17–21.