

Discussion Prompt: Empathy in Co-Curricular Spaces

Duration: 30 - 45 minutes

Student Learning Objectives: Students will distinguish between sympathy and empathy and identify empathetic actions and behaviors, drawing from audiovisual testimony of genocide survivors. Students will consider the resultant positive effects of showing empathy, particularly on campus.

Step 1

- **Overview:** In this section, students will explore their understanding of sympathy and empathy.
- **Discuss:** Open the discussion by asking students to define “sympathy” and “empathy.” Use research professor Brené Brown’s video on [Empathy](#) to help distinguish between the two concepts. Inform students that they will assess the purpose and value of empathy to form human connection. Students will hear from survivors of genocide and mass atrocity to understand the importance of empathetic actions in difficult situations and circumstances.
- Ask students to draw from their lived experiences for examples of empathy. These examples could include instances of empathy from their local campus communities as well as from the larger cultural and political communities.
- If relevant, offer the below sentence starters as possible prompts:
 - *I think this means...*
 - *I agree with _____ because...*
 - *My ideas are similar to _____ because...*
 - *I hear what _____ is saying, but I disagree because...*
 - *My idea is different than _____ because...*

Step 2

- **Overview:** In this section, students will be introduced to a primary source: audiovisual testimony. Depending on the size of the group and time constraints, you may want to separate the students into three groups and assign each group one of the following testimonies.
- **Testimony Clips:** Display the bios for Marion Blumenthal Lazan, Alex Gross, and Deshou Chen (included at the end of this Discussion Prompt). Then show each student group their clip of testimony to gain different perspectives on empathetic action.
- **Discuss:** Ask students in each group to reflect on and analyze the actions described in the clips and whether and why the actions are empathetic. Direct students to consider the challenges and obstacles to being empathic in such situations. Ask: What would you do in the situation to embody empathy or support empathetic action?

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Step 3

- **Overview:** Next, students will be introduced to different situations from college/university life that could require empathetic action and will be asked to consider their reactions and responses to these situations.
- **Discuss:** Split students into small groups. Assign each group to consider one of the situations below. Ask: What would you do in the situation to embody empathy? What are some actions or behaviors that would be supportive in this situation? What are some actions or behaviors that could be harmful or hurtful in this situation?
 - During midterm week, you and all of your roommates are very busy. Your roommates stop doing dishes and cleaning the common area. One of them is particularly emotionally distressed and bursts out crying in the middle of the night. You are trying your best to remain calm and clean while studying. What do you do? *[Rationale: It is often harder to be empathetic when under pressure.]*
 - In a large lecture class, the professor makes a joke about an underrepresented group of people. Almost all of the students laugh along, some quietly and nervously. The students of the underrepresented group look at first confused and then hurt. You are at a loss. What do you do? *[Rationale: Empathy is hard to act on when you are not in a position of power.]*
 - You are celebrating at a friend's birthday party. You are having a great time, but you notice someone you don't know becoming overly intoxicated. No one else seems to notice (or care) and members of the group persist to ply him/her with more alcohol. What do you do? *[Rationale: It is difficult to be empathetic towards strangers or when acting alone.]*
 - In one of your smaller seminar classes, you are seated next to a student who is clearly learning English as an adult. She seems at a loss for how to follow along with the syllabus. You already see a group of people you know a few seats away and want to move to sit near to them. What do you do? *[Rationale: Interacting with people from different language or cultural backgrounds can become an empathy challenge.]*
 - You and your roommates are very excited to decorate your new place. As it was your idea to buy a futon, you are in charge of choosing the futon. You spend a few hours searching, and find one that you think will be perfect. When you bring up the cost, however, one of your potential roommates appears embarrassed and quiet. You realize that he/she might not have the money to cover his/her portion. What do you do? *[Rationale: Empathetic action becomes more complicated when considering socio-economic factors and personal dignity.]*

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Step 4

- **Overview:** Return the students to the whole group setting to reflect.
- **Discuss:** Ask representatives from the small groups to share out some of their responses to the scenario they discussed. Encourage them to identify how group member responses differed or if a common theme was uncovered. Did any responses surprise them? Facilitate a discussion about how to foster empathy on campus among students. Encourage students not only to share their own thoughts, but react to the responses of their classmates.
- **Optional:** Have students discuss the following question: *Considering the current cultural conflicts in the United States, why is empathy important on college campuses?*

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Alex Gross

Alex Gross was born on Sept 18th 1928, in Palonk, Czechoslovakia. He grew up in a very Orthodox family. When Alex was a child, non-Jewish children broke his leg intentionally by kicking him during a soccer game. After a few instances of being attacked by Hitler Youth and fighting back with his brothers, Alex's family moved to Budapest. On the last day of Passover in 1944, Alex's family was forced out of their house and moved to a ghetto in Mukacevo. Alex was first sent to Auschwitz I and then transported to Buchenwald. After liberation by American forces, Alex returned to his hometown before migrating first to the United Kingdom and then to the United States. All six brothers and one sister in the family survived. Alex later went to the UK with his sister and migrated to USA. He gave his interview on January 24, 1996, in Conyers, Georgia.

Deshou Chen

Deshou Chen was born in 1932 in Nanjing, China. His mother was a housewife and his father owned a clothing store. When Japanese soldiers started bombing Nanjing in 1937, Deshou Chen's family didn't have enough money to leave Nanjing. On December 13, 1937, the Japanese army set the street on fire. Deshou's father went out to put out the fire, and was killed by the Japanese army. When Deshou was six years old, the Japanese soldiers broke into his family's house to look for a woman. As a result, they grabbed his aunt and she died after being stabbed six times. Three days after his aunt died, a petty official from the Japanese army walked by their house. He said his family also had a small shop in Japan. Seeing what had happened to the family, he helped them find a coffin for Deshou's aunt, and took Deshou's grandfather to get some food. This helped them to overcome the hardship during the war. Deshou's mother took Deshou and his sister to a safety zone under a relative's help, which was a three-story house with no windows and no door. Over ten people were hiding inside. When Deshou was nine years old, conditions began to improve. His grandfather taught him how to sew so he could support himself. After China won the war, Deshou was introduced to a clothing store to work as an apprentice. Under his stepfather's help, he had the first chance to receive an education when he was twelve years old. After 1949 following the liberation of China, Deshou worked in a Nanjing clothing factory until he retired in 1983. He was married when he was twenty-eight years old and has one son and one daughter. This interview took place on 15 December, 2011, in Nanjing, China.

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Marion Blumenthal Lazan

Marion Blumenthal Lazan was born on December 20, 1934, in Bremen, Germany. After Kristallnacht in November 1938, her father was taken away and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. He was released ten days later because his immigration papers were in order. The family moved to the Netherlands, with the hope of moving to the United States. Her family settled in Gouda and took care of 725 children whose parents sent them to the Netherlands from various parts of Europe. In May 1940, the Germans invaded the Netherlands and Marion's family could not leave. All of their belongings were destroyed when the Germans bombed the city and demolished the harbor in Rotterdam where their possessions had been stored. The family was sent to the Westerbok transit camp. Life was tolerable, as they lived in barracks and stayed together as family, with enough food to eat. In February of 1944, Marion was sent to Bergen-Belsen. After liberation by the Soviet Armed Forces, Marion first went to the Netherlands and then to the United States. She gave her testimony on February 6, 1995, in Hewlett, New York.