

## Empathy Without Agreement

In today's world of substance abuse there are so many heated debates about various viewpoints. Recovery has become much more individualized. Therefore, people's personal outlook on the change process, right or wrong, is an integral part of the equation. But when learning empathy, the thought that, "If I try to understand another's opposing viewpoint, I am therefore saying that I agree with it or condone it," can halt the empathy process like a brick wall in the middle of the road. So how can you reconcile differing views?

"Empathy without Agreement" – or the ability to allow oneself to understand a viewpoint that one does not agree with, is a critical factor when it comes to moving past these debates.

### Consider An Example:

Tom age 19, says "There is nothing at all wrong with me smoking marijuana regularly, as long as I am not using hard drugs like heroin and crack I will be fine." But his father, who himself is a long time recovering addict says, "A drug is a drug and if you're getting high, eventually you'll experience worsening consequences."

**Analysis:** Forgetting about who may be right or wrong for a second, for these two individuals to be able to move forward it would be important to try to practice "Empathy without Agreement." There are many people in the world who agree with Tom's viewpoint, and there are many others who would side with his father. However, to effectively practice Empathy without Agreement, one has to let go of the idea that if they try to understand the opposing viewpoint, that means that they are condoning it. In this example, Empathy without Agreement would play out something like this:

**Tom** – (Empathizing with Dad even though he does not agree with him) – "I understand that my father worries that my marijuana smoking will one day progress to harder drugs because he is concerned about what is best for me and he wants me to be a success in life. I disagree and think that I am going to be a success anyway regardless if I smoke marijuana because I still did well in school despite my marijuana use. But I do realize that he is just trying to look out for me because he cares."

**Father** – Practicing Empathy without Agreement – "I was young once, and I remember what it was like to feel invincible and to want to have a good time and to think that I could party without things getting worse. I realize that Tom believes that as long as he is going to school and he isn't getting arrested he is going to be fine. I disagree and think he is making a mistake but I do realize that he simply does not believe there is a chance things could get worse."

### The Goal Is To Facilitate Healthy Dialogue

Please do not miss the point being made here. This is not at all about whose viewpoint is the right one in the above example. Eventually, in Tom's case, time would tell who was correct. The critical point here is that by practicing Empathy without Agreement, Tom and his father are increasing the

likelihood of maintaining a productive and constructive dialogue with one another without constantly butting heads because each side refuses to try to see the other's viewpoint.

In just about any disagreement, empathy can be like a bridge between opposing islands. It can be difficult and challenging to cross that bridge, however, nonetheless by trying to understand others whom we do not agree with is a much needed starting point in keeping those vital lines of communication open. Where there is communication, there is still hope in any dispute. Therefore, in any potentially heated dispute, learning to practice and display Empathy without Agreement is an essential tool for all involved.

[www.takingtheescalator.com](http://www.takingtheescalator.com)