

EMPATHIC DESIGN

Empathic Conversations

CONVERSATIONS AND CONNECTIONS THAT DEVELOP EMPATHY

- 1. Express empathy in the conversation.** Lean in to the conversation and be totally present. Don't take notes while the person is talking. Listen. Express emotion. Pause if the person expresses emotion. Acknowledge the emotion that is present in the conversation. Verbalize your feelings, "I am trying to imagine how that must feel." Don't be afraid to ask, "How did that make you feel?"
- 2. Listen and encourage.** Guide but don't unnecessarily lead the conversation. Let the interviewee tell you what they need to tell you.
- 3. Let the person's answers lead the discussion.** For example, if someone says, "The children have no place to go and to play," follow with the question, "Can you tell me about one child in particular?"
- 4. Gather details — it furthers the design process.** Someone might say, "I don't know how to get the food to my shelter." You might say, "That must be challenging. How far is the shelter from the meal program?"
- 5. Work with ambivalence.** The conversation is not about agreement, or even necessarily liking the person you are interviewing. Rather, it is about listening and learning. Everyone has a story. All stories contain clues and lessons.
- 6. Honor the person's perspective.** Someone may be very religious. You may not be. Don't let a person's belief, tone, or language, cloud their message. Don't let how something is said taint the message itself.
- 7. Roll with resistance.** Someone may say, "You don't know what it's like to leave prison and not have a job." Try to overcome that resistance by saying something like, "You are correct, I don't know how that feels. Can you help me understand?"
- 8. Support self-efficacy for the person you are interviewing.** Have confidence in them and affirm their collaborative role in the process.
- 9. Settle into differences and discomfort.** Tone, accent, vocabulary, grammar, dress, smell are all differences. Get past these and hear the heart of the person's story.
- 10. Don't ignore the ordinary.** It may not be ordinary to the person you are interviewing. For example, the person may spend a lot of time talking about clean clothes. Having clean clothes may be unusual for them. Affirm the importance of that seemingly simple idea.
- 11. Use the interview to make a friend.** Don't be too formal. Be casual, warm, and welcoming. Don't make jokes. Spontaneous jokes have a way of backfiring because humor can sometimes emerge from fear, discomfort, and avoidance. Humor may not demonstrate your concern.

12. **Tell a story to get a story.** You are not trying to show off, but tell a simple story from your experience. For example, the person may mention that they like peach pie, and you may say, "I once tried to make a peach pie and it was a disaster. It tasted like glue." This is not an opportunity to boast or brag. Be humble and connect over little moments in the conversation.

13. **When all else fails, talk about the weather or sports.** Both have a way of warming up a conversation and establishing a common ground. Common ground is the departure point for other points in the conversation. You may start with a conversation about a dog and end up in a conversation about addiction.

14. **Focus on experience as much as facts.** Let someone tell you about a particularly hard day in school. That story will teach you much more about the person than their grade point average.

15. **At the conclusion of the interview, thank the person and share something that you learned.**