Empathy Vs. Sympathy: Why It Matters in Sports

This is the third note in our Y-STAR (Youth-Sports Trauma Awareness and Responsiveness) series. As a reminder, becoming more trauma aware and responsive as a coach or parent is effective for working with ALL young athletes, not just those who have experienced trauma. Trauma responsive coaching is good coaching for all athletes. Go to our website to read more thoroughly the resources that we have made available on Trauma Sensitive and Responsive Coaching or listen to this podcast from St. Louis KMOX Sports Radio that gives an overview on the topic.

Our culture often uses the terms "empathy" and "sympathy" interchangeably, but there is a big difference in the two. And, it is an important difference when it comes to working with young athletes, especially those who have been victims of trauma.

According to Merriam-Webster, "sympathy is the feeling that you care about and are sorry about someone else's trouble, grief, misfortune, etc." Miriam-Webster defines "empathy" as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present..."

According to researcher, Dr. Brené Brown, a University of Houston professor who studies courage and vulnerability, "Empathy drives connection and sympathy drives disconnection." See her video on the power of empathy here:

Brown suggests that there are four key characteristics required to successfully practice empathy. They are:

1. Perspective taking - accepting the other person's viewpoint as valid and real to them; but, not necessarily agreeing with it.
2. Staying out of Judgment - refraining from judging someone as good or bad based on their expression of thoughts or feelings through their behavior
3. Recognizing emotion - being able to correctly identify and label emotions in another individual.*
4. Communicating the understanding of emotion in others - being able to communicate the understanding of another's emotions in a way that shows understanding, appreciation and acceptance. "You feel ____ about ____.”

* According to Dr. Brown, the average American adult is able to identify only three emotions: Happy, Sad, and Angry. So, how can we expect kids to be better at it without any coaching?

Essentially then, empathy is "being with people", being with your student-athletes, no matter what they are feeling or how they are behaving and no matter how much you may personally find their behavior is off-putting. Keep in mind that acceptance of the individual does not imply condoning the behavior.

Helen Riess, M.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Co-Founder, and Chief Scientist & Chairman of Empathetics, LLC, uses the acronym, E-M-P-A-T-H-Y, to explain how to practice empathy with another individual such as one of your players or a parent:

E - eye contact - maintain appropriate but not forced eye contact with the individual to demonstrate that "I see you."*
M - muscles of facial expression - noticing if there is tension in your facial muscles and relaxing them if necessary to convey warmth and openness.
P - posture - adopt an open, welcoming posture that conveys connection rather than disinterest or disconnection.
A - affect - monitoring your own emotions as well as appreciating expressed emotions and naming of feelings.
T - tone of voice - using a tone of voice that is calm and understanding rather than condescending or threatening.
This week, pay special attention to how you relate to your athletes. Make a point to follow the EMPATHY acronym guidelines.

"If at times your wing seems a bit more broken than all the others, remember that the fallen sparrow was infinitely lovable to the One whose image is the gentleness of a Lamb, senselessly slaughtered on a cross of wood." (In the Kingdom of the Lonely God, 1973, p.90).

~ Rev. Robert "Griff" Griffin, Notre Dame's first university chaplain once wrote with empathy to an anonymous student feeling lonely, isolated and "different."

"The secret of Christian living is Love. Only love fills the empty spaces caused by evil."

Watch this video produced by students from Play Like a Champion partner East Catholic High School in Hartford, CT as they stand in empathy and prayer with victims of violence and injustice which we see all too often in our world today.