

## What It Is

Social awareness is about recognizing and understanding others' emotions, needs, and concerns. It involves practicing empathy, learning how organizational structures affect people, and understanding how to meet others' needs.

## How Improving It Helps You

Social awareness is a prerequisite for building solid relationships, whether that's with friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, clients, or anyone else in your life.

**The key to social awareness lies in your ability to empathize with others** – to imagine yourself in their place, understanding their motives, worries, joys, pains, hopes, etc. Showing genuine empathy helps others to trust you, and trust opens many doors.

The opposite is also true – a lack of empathy creates distrust, resulting in others wanting to keep their distance from you. Some see empathy as a sign of weakness, but research has proven that the most successful leaders and organizations are those who highly value empathy and the bridges it builds.

Improving your social awareness starts with tuning into others' emotions, so you can better understand them and use that understanding to strengthen relationships.

*Take some time to think about why you want to heighten your social awareness, and write your response here:*

### Why do I want to improve my social awareness?

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## Practices to Improve Your Social Awareness

### Active Listening

Hearing is not the same as listening, and listening is not always active listening. To recognize others' emotions and be able to empathize with them, you have to actively listen beyond the words they're saying and imagine yourself in their position, feeling what they're feeling.

A few tips for doing this are:

#### Putting your thoughts on mute

- It's too easy to get side-tracked by our own thoughts when we're listening to someone, so give yourself a mental cue to mute your thought stream and tune in fully to the other person. This helps to

stop your mind from wandering and formulating what you want to say, and it forces you to listen to everything they're saying before jumping in with a response.

### Laying aside assumptions

- Janet Sprimont says in an *Inspireity* article, "Good listeners don't assume they know or understand a situation before hearing someone out. They listen, look for the facts of the situation, and then analyze the emotions surrounding it."
- You may think you fully understand a situation, but you don't until you listen to others' perspectives. Do a mental check of any assumptions you may be carrying and let them go so you can reserve judgment while you listen.

### Noting energy in tone of voice

- Listen for the energy in how someone speaks and whether you know this to be their typical energy level, or if they sound more or less enthusiastic than usual. This could give you a clue to how they're feeling – regardless of the words they're saying – and help you determine the best response.

### Facial Expressions and Body Language

Whether someone is speaking or not, their physical expressions often give away their emotions. Do they keep looking away from the person they're interacting with? Are they fidgety? Completely stoic? Then there's probably something on their mind more interesting or pressing (to them) than the current conversation.

Or, are they focused on the speaker, making eye contact, and nodding while they listen? Paying attention to these factors can tell you a lot about how engaged people are in their interactions with others, or whether there may be something on their mind that they deem more important.

Keep in mind, people have different levels of expressiveness, so if you don't know someone very well, don't assume they're more or less engaged than someone else solely based on their outward enthusiasm.

### Empathetic Acknowledgment

Showing understanding and empathy toward someone doesn't mean you have to agree with their point of view.

What's important is to acknowledge their emotions as valid, whether or not you agree with what they're saying. **If someone's emotions weren't valid, then they wouldn't be having them, so pay attention to how you respond and ensure you're not dismissing, judging, or rejecting their emotions.**

Here are some example responses to show you're aware of their emotions, without either agreeing or disagreeing with them:

- "I can understand why that is upsetting for you."
- "I can see this is an uncomfortable situation for you."
- "I hear your concern and appreciate that you care."
- "I haven't had that experience myself, but I can imagine how difficult it is."
- "I appreciate that you trust me enough to share that."

## Asking Guiding Questions

If you are in a situation where you think someone doesn't have good reason to be feeling the way they are, again, don't invalidate their feelings. **Instead of responding by telling them that they don't understand or they're wrong, ask questions so you can better understand why they feel the way they do.**

These thought-provoking questions will help you to see the other person's perspective more fully, and being asked to explain will help them process through their emotions, perhaps even coming to the conclusion themselves that they aren't reacting appropriately.

You don't need to be a psychologist to know what kinds of questions to ask. Here are some basic ones that apply in many contexts:

- "Why do you think you're feeling that way?"
- "Do you think that's really what's upsetting you, or could it be something else?"
- "Could this stem from a miscommunication or an assumption?"
- "What was it about that decision/situation/interaction/etc. that made you feel that way?"
- "What do you think would be the best next step?"

*Whether through these techniques or others you've learned, write down some ways you can work on better recognizing and understanding others' emotions:*

## To improve my social awareness, what steps am I going to take right now?

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## Questions for Reflection

Once you've spent some time using these or other practices to focus on improving your social awareness, think through the questions below to reflect on what you've found.

### *What steps have I taken to become more aware of others' emotions?*

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***When listening to others, what do I do to consciously focus on the meaning of what they're saying?***

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***What's an assumption I've made that turned out to be inaccurate when I listened to someone else's perspective?***

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***Have there been times where I've dismissed or judged someone's emotions?  
What could I have done or said to validate them instead?***

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***How have I noticed others showing empathy to me?***

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*How have my relationships been affected by practicing greater awareness and empathy?*

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