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ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What prevents us from being empathetic?

OVERVIEW

In some circumstances having empathy for a person or an animal can be relatively straightforward. For example, when you see a dog's tail wag when you come home, you can feel the dog's happiness. The reason having empathy can be difficult is that our ability to empathize can become blocked. In this lesson, four common empathy blockers will be discussed: a lack of information, strong feelings of fear or anger, prejudice, and denial. Students will think critically about what can prevent people from being empathetic, and how they can engage with this information to become more empathetic themselves.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to…

➢ Identify at least three influences that can prevent someone from feeling empathy.

➢ Explain how certain influences can prevent someone from feeling empathy.

➢ Develop solutions to empathy blockers that will help people embrace empathy.

Day 1:

1. Warm Up (10 min.)

➢ Begin the lesson by explaining to students that they will be discussing *empathy*.

➢ Explain that *empathy* is the ability to understand how a person or animal feels. Provide two examples, such as, "When my cat had to go to the vet for a check-up, I empathized with her, and I could feel her fear" and "When we surprised my dad with a birthday party, I could feel his excitement."

➢ Then, ask students to share a time when it was easy for them to understand how a person or animal felt. As they share their examples, ask them why they were able to understand how that person or animal felt. They might explain that they knew how the

GRADE LEVEL 3-5

TIME NEEDED Two 45 min. periods

SUBJECTS   Social Studies,
English Language Arts

STANDARDS

Common Core
ELA-Literacy: RI.3.1, RI.4.1, RI.5.1
RL.3.3
RL.4.1, RL.5.1

MATERIALS

❑ *Empathy Blockers* Reading

❑ *Empathy Blocker* Scenarios

VOCABULARY/TERMS

• Empathy, Empathetic, Empathize
• Empathy Blockers
• Prejudice
• Amygdala

WARM UP NOTE
It may be difficult for students to think of examples of when they were not able to have empathy for someone else, so be prepared to share a few examples.

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individual felt because they have experienced something similar or because of the way that person or animal acted (e.g., crying, laughing).

➢ Ask students if there has ever been a situation where they had a difficult time understanding the feelings of a person or animal. Ask them to share and provide an example such as, "When my friend received an A on the test he seemed upset, but I was not sure why. I could not understand exactly what he was feeling or why he felt that way" or "When my sister came over, my dog was barking in a way she had not barked before. I could not understand exactly what she was feeling or why she felt that way."

➢ Name the following four common *empathy blockers*, which can prevent people from feeling empathy:

- ➲ Lack of information
- ➲ Strong feelings of fear and anger
- ➲ Prejudice
- ➲ Denial

2. Empathy Blockers Reading (15 min.)

➢ Explain to students that they will read about these four reasons people can have a difficult time experiencing empathy.

➢ As a group, read *Common Empathy Blockers*.

➢ Invite students to share their experiences with these empathy blockers or share your own experiences with empathy blockers.

3. Empathy Blocker Scenarios (20 min.)

➢ Next, share some examples of people not expressing empathy. The student's task is to decide which empathy blocker(s) is/are best demonstrated in the situation and then consider what the people in the scenario can do to overcome what is blocking their empathy. This activity can be done as a class or in small groups.

➢ Pass out the *Empathy Blockers Scenario* Worksheet to each student.

➢ Either read each of the following scenarios to the class or ask student volunteers to read the scenarios. Allow the students time to answer the two questions on their own or to discuss in small groups before sharing their responses with the whole class.

- ➲ **SCENARIO #1:** *The Geracy family (Hassan, Lena, and their son, Lewis) lives in Montana. Hassan is a professor at the local community college and Lena is a volunteer at a homeless shelter. The family is Muslim and, just like most followers of any major religion, they believe in treating people with kindness and respect. However, their neighbor does not understand their religion, and is afraid of all Muslims because of the terrorist acts committed by a small number of extremists, who happen to be Muslim. This neighbor is unfriendly to the Geracys and has told others that he does not want them in the community, even though the family has been respectful and kind to him.*

RESOURCE LINKS

Six Habits of Highly Empathetic People
http://bit.ly/1d8k46p

Empathy Library
http://empathylibrary.com/about-the-library

Cool School: Where Peace Rules
http://coolschoolgame.com/

Common Sense Education Review of Cool School: Where Peace Rules
http://bit.ly/2cT2DyXSpent:
http://playspent.org/

Common Sense Education Review of Spent
http://bit.ly/2dA3JDV

EXTENSION PROJECTS

- **Historical and Current Events Connections:** Challenge students to apply what they learned about empathy blockers to examples from history or current events. Ask students to work in small groups. Provide each group with information about either a historical or current event when a certain group of people or a specific animal species experienced oppression. Challenge students to apply what they learned about empathy blockers to consider how a lack of empathy might have affected the way that group was treated. Ask them to consider how the treatment of their group might have been different if other groups in society expressed empathy for them. Consider having the students create presentations about the event they studied for the class.

- **Discussion:** Screen a film with your students that is told from the point of view of a person or animal who experiences mistreatment in the story, such as *Black Beauty*. Ask your students to identify when someone did not appear to have empathy for the narrator and what caused the lack of empathy. Then ask them to identify when someone appeared to have empathy for the narrator and how empathy was demonstrated.

EXTENSION PROJECTS

➲ **SCENARIO #1 DISCUSSION:** Allow students to share their answers. If students do not mention it, explain that this scenario could demonstrate several empathy blockers, but the blockers causing the most influence are "prejudice" and "lack of information." During the discussion of how the neighbor could overcome these empathy blockers, explain that it is important that we question our opinions of others and think about whether they are caused by prejudice. We should also make an effort to learn about diverse religions, cultures, and lifestyles that are different from our own so that we will have more information about the perspectives of others. Additionally, we can make an effort to talk with people we think are different from us and work towards seeing ways that we are similar.

➲ **SCENARIO #2:** *Arthur, a sweet dog, is now living in a home with a loving family, but his life used to be very different. He used to live with a man named Frank who became very angry with him when he barked too loudly or chewed on Frank's shoes. Frank did not know that Arthur barked because he was anxious when a stranger walked past the house. Frank also did not know that Arthur chewed on shoes because he did not have any toys to chew. Instead of helping Arthur with these problems, Frank would hit Arthur or make him sleep outside in the cold. A neighbor could see that Frank was cruel to Arthur and offered to take him to an animal shelter. Frank decided he did not want Arthur anymore so he agreed. While at the adoption center a family who understood Arthur's feelings and needs adopted him and gave him a loving home.*

➲ **SCENARIO #2 DISCUSSION:** Allow students to share their answers. If students do not mention it, explain that this scenario could demonstrate several of the empathy blockers, but that the blockers causing the most influence are "strong feelings of anger" and "lack of information." During the discussion of how Frank could overcome these empathy blockers, explain that it is important that we learn how to cope with our anger. It is okay to be angry, but we have to express our anger by communicating our feelings in an open and honest way. It is not okay to express our anger by being cruel toward people or animals. We should also learn to better understand animals and how to correct unwanted behaviors by using techniques that are effective and humane. There is a lot of information available in books and online about how to teach animals through humane training techniques.

Day 2:
4. Writing (35 min.)

➢ Review what empathy means and the examples of empathy blockers with students.

➢ Ask students to complete one of the following writing activities:

➲ Choose one of the empathy blocker scenarios from the handout to re-write. In your new version show how the characters

EXTENSION PROJECTS
CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

- **Educational Game:** There are several online games that teach students how to be more empathetic. Consider allowing your students to play some of these games. For younger grades, the game *Cool School: Where Peace Rules* allows students to explore a virtual school and resolve conflicts among cartoon characters involved in common classroom conflicts. When students are resolving conflicts in the game, ask them which empathy blockers are happening and what advice they would give to the characters in the game.

- **Educational Game:** For older students, the game *Spent* is a poverty simulator that simulates the life of an adult who faces daily struggles due to difficult financial circumstances. This game will let you foster a discussion around issues of poverty, misconceptions about those who struggle with poverty, and how to develop more empathy toward those individuals. It could raise some sensitive issues, and it is best if the teacher facilitates the conversation with the entire class. Please refer to the resource links for these two games and the Common Sense Education rating.

EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT
Mickey Kudia
I think empathy is the most important thing we can teach young people, and not just empathy for people and animals with whom they are familiar. Having empathy for your friends and companion animals is easy, but having empathy for all living beings, especially those who are marginalized in society, may be more challenging and is necessary to create a world that is truly just and peaceful.

could feel empathy and then put their empathy into action. Demonstrate how the story changes when an individual feels empathy for someone else.

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 Write an empathy blocker scenario based on a time when you did not feel empathy for someone else or someone did not have empathy for you. Identify the empathy blocker that prevented you or someone else from feeling empathy and explain how the situation would have been different if empathy was expressed.

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 Write an empathy scenario based on a time when you felt empathy for someone or someone felt empathy for you, a person or an animal. Explain how the empathy was expressed, how it made the individual who was empathized with feel, and what happened in the situation.

➢ Consider providing students time to share their writing with a partner, a small group, or with the whole class, if they want to. Be cognizant that some of their work may be too personal to share.
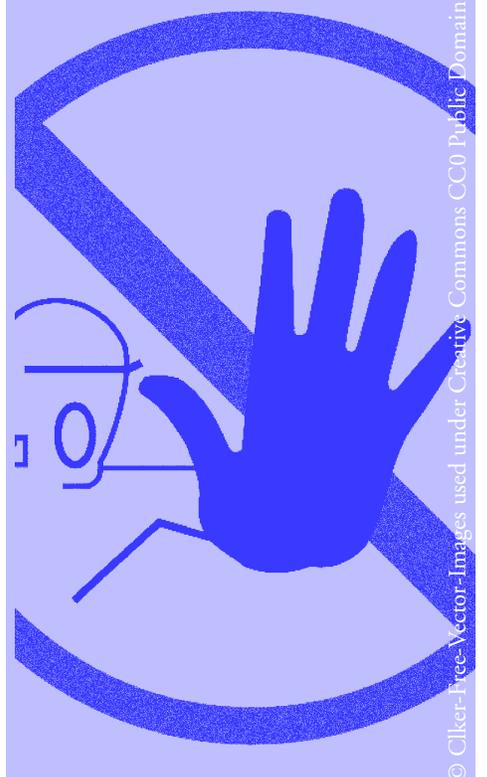
5. Wrap Up (10 min.)

➢ Review with students the four common empathy blockers: (1) they lack information about the perspective of the person or animal; (2) they have strong feelings of fear or anger; (3) they have a prejudice against a person or animal; and/or (4) they are in denial of what the person or animal is feeling or experiencing.

➢ Then ask students what they can do to prevent themselves from blocking their own empathy. Allow for responses and then discuss the following:

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 Read books/watch movies with stories told from different perspectives; talk with people who they think might be different from themselves; be mindful of their emotions especially when they are angry or afraid; be critical of their opinions and how they might be influenced by prejudice; be open to what someone else might be experiencing or feeling; and research information they hear about what a person or animal might be experiencing if they are unsure of its accuracy.
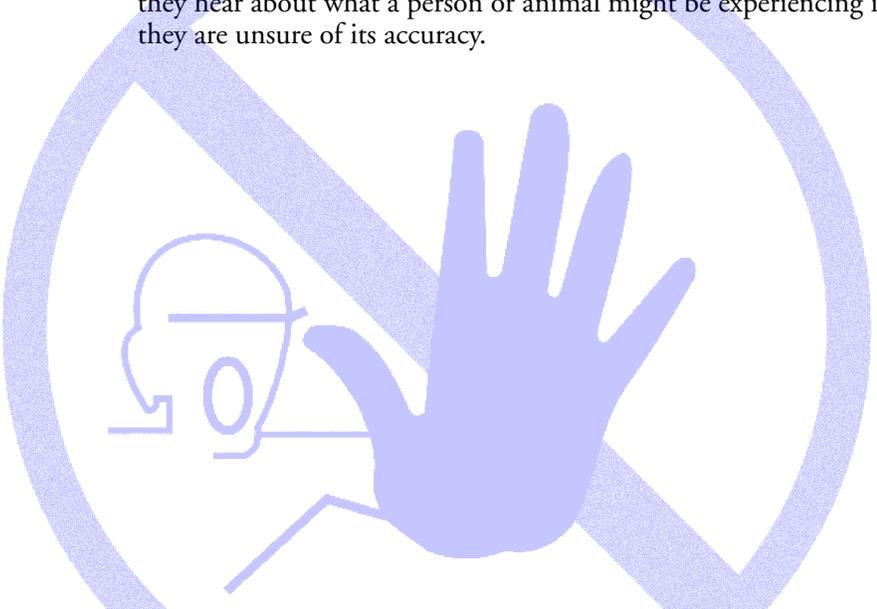
WRITING NOTE
You could assign this activity as homework, instead of an in-class activity. This would give students more time to think about and write their scenarios. As an enhancement to this activity invite students to include an illustration with their writing.

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COMMON EMPATHY BLOCKERS

Having empathy for someone can be difficult because it can mean being vulnerable and opening ourselves up to understanding someone's feelings of frustration, pain, confusion, or sadness. There are also certain influencers known as *empathy blockers* that can make it even more difficult to feel empathy. Below is a description of four common empathy blockers: lack of information; strong feelings of fear or anger; prejudice; and denial.

1. Lack of Information

We can never know everything about someone or what they have experienced. Often people will guess how a person feels or why they are acting a certain way. Since we do not have all the information, these assumptions can be inaccurate.

Example: Gael's teacher thought that Gael was being stubborn because he did not participate in the class activity. What Gael's teacher did not know was that Gael's parents were getting a divorce and he felt upset and depressed. Gael could not concentrate on the activity because he was so anxious about his home life. He didn't know why his parents were fighting so much and he didn't know where he would end up living.

2. Strong Feelings of Fear or Anger

When someone feels scared or angry, it can be difficult to have empathy for others because a part of the brain that allows someone to think and use empathy is taken over by the amygdala, another part of the brain. The amygdala causes people to act and say things without thinking. When the amygdala takes over, it is sometimes called the *fight-or-flight response* or the *amygdala hijack.**

Example: Sandra is angry with her younger sister for accidently spilling a drink on her new shirt. Her sister tries to explain that it was a mistake, but Sandra is so upset about what happened that she does not have empathy for her sister and accuses her of doing it on purpose. If she felt empathy for her sister, she would realize that her sister feels guilty and wants to figure out a way to fix the situation.

3. Prejudice

Prejudice is when someone develops an opinion about someone before they know the individual. Their opinion is not based on truth, but on an unfair judgment they have of a group with which they associate the individual. When someone is prejudiced toward someone else they often have negative feelings toward them, such as anger, fear, or disgust. People's prejudices are often based on characteristics like skin color, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. People can even be prejudiced against animals because they have unfavorable feelings about a certain animal species.

Example: Jacob sees his neighbor walking her pet Pit Bull. Jacob is scared of Pit Bulls because he heard a story on the news about a Pit Bull who bit someone. He thinks that because this dog is also a Pit Bull, she is mean and aggressive. If Jacob felt empathy for the dog, he would realize from the dog's wagging tail and smile that the dog is happy, friendly, and does not want to hurt him.

4. Denial

When someone is in denial they refuse to believe that something is true. Sometimes when we hear new information it is difficult for us to accept it. Also, if something really terrible happens or someone is in an awful situation, people deny that it is actually happening because it is too difficult for them to accept that something so bad could actually be true.

Example: Naoki told his friend Camila that he did not eat meat because cows, pigs, and chickens can experience the same feelings as dogs and cats. He said that they are treated cruelly on large-scale farms and he did not want to support that. Camila told Naoki that he was wrong. She explained that her parents told her cows, pigs, and chickens are here for people to eat. She also said that farms would be shut down if they were that cruel to animals. Camila was in denial that what Naoki was telling her might be true because she loved animals and did not want to think about them being mistreated.

*The term *amygdala hijack* was coined by Daniel Goleman in his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ.*

Name: _____

Scenario #1

The Geracy family (Hassan, Lena, and their son, Lewis) lives in Montana. Hassan is a professor at the local community college and Lena is a volunteer at a homeless shelter. The family is Muslim and, just like most followers of any major religion, they believe in treating people with kindness and respect.

However, their neighbor does not understand their religion, and is afraid of all Muslims because of the terrorist acts committed by a small number of extremists, who happen to be Muslim. This neighbor is unfriendly to the Geracys and has told others that he does not want them in the community, even though the family has been respectful and kind to him.

Which empathy blocker[s] do you think best describe[s] this situation? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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Using empathy, how do you think the Geracy family feels, knowing that their neighbor does not want them in the community? How does the neighbor feel?

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What could this neighbor do to better understand the Geracy family?

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Scenario #2

Arthur, a sweet dog, is now living in a home with a loving family, but his life used to be very different. He used to live with a man named Frank who became very angry with him when he barked too loudly or chewed on Frank's shoes. Frank did not know that Arthur barked because he was anxious when a stranger walked past the house. Frank also did not know that Arthur chewed on shoes because he did not have any toys to chew. Instead of helping Arthur with these problems, Frank would hit Arthur or make him sleep outside in the cold. A neighbor could see that Frank was cruel to Arthur and offered to take him to an animal adoption center. Frank decided he did not want Arthur anymore so he agreed. While at the adoption center a family who understood Arthur's feelings and needs adopted him and gave him a loving home.

Which empathy blocker[s] do you think best describe[s] this situation? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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Using empathy, how do you think Arthur felt when he lived with Frank? How do you think Arthur felt when he was taken to the animal shelter? How do you think he feels now with his new family? How do you think Frank feels?

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What could Frank have done to better understand Arthur?

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