

How to Give and Receive Empathy

Interview with Sweigh Spilkin

Olivier: Hello Sweigh, so good to see you!

Sweigh: Hi Olivier. Good to see you.

Olivier: Yes, Sweigh, you were our roommate for six months. It was awesome living with you and we were so sad when you left. But, you know I'm happy that you're building your own family and your future and everything. I'm so excited to talk to you because during our connection together, you struck me as someone who's really an empath. And works with empaths and really knows that empathy is. And so I'm doing this little research around how can we be better at empathy, giving and receiving empathy? Especially in people who are in a committed relationship. Maybe the honeymoon phase is over. We would give space to the other person to be who they are, but after a while it's not working for us anymore. And we get upset and pissed and triggered. Usually when we're triggered, what I've noticed for myself and in books I've been reading and stuff, the man tends to want to fix the situation and the woman wants connection. And if there's a trigger happening, if they can feel what's happening for the other person as an empath, for example, they might want to either change the other person's feelings or fix the problem in the other person so that the other person does not feel that troubling feeling that they're feeling.

Olivier: So I'm sorry, I just forgot to ask you. Just a little bit of your background, who you are and what excites you.

Sweigh: Well you're just passionate about the topic so you wanted to dive right in. I feel that way, too.

Olivier: Right.

Sweigh: So yeah, thank you. So I, for people who don't know me, I am trained as a somatic psychotherapist. So that's a body centered psychotherapist. I have a PhD in somatic psychotherapy. I've been in private practice with clients and healers, primary first in Boulder, Colorado and now more online and internationally. And a lot of the focus originally has been around trauma work but that really evolved to specifically working with healers. And a lot of the healers that I work with are empaths. And so, individuals who are really here to do their soul work in the world in a particular way. I get super excited by folks who are already working in this realm of what you're passionate about. The juiciness and the intricacy of intimacy and relationship and growth and service to the planet and all of that. So that tends to be the focus of my work.

- Sweigh: And I've also created a big training called Empath Mastery, that's for empaths in particular around how do we shift out of empathic distress where we're actually just flooded by experience and the other person. And we're not actually able to access empathy when we're in that. And this is something that's important to name. How do we shift out of that and into true service as allowing the porousness of our nervous systems and our beings to be the gift that it is. So that's a big part of what I'm passionate about and work with.
- Olivier: Wow. You're transmitting your passion to me right now. I'm getting jazzed about what you're passionate about. This is really great stuff. Wow. It's like already I want to learn more about what you're doing, et cetera. Let's stay on this focus. For example, some people consider themselves as empaths which means they can sense what's happening in someone else. And other people, they are more like -I don't remember who called them, like "bricks", which means they don't relate to that. So those people, they might need more of a method, bullets points, what should I say? What should I not say? But for empaths, all that does not make any sense.
- Olivier: So let's imagine the standard couple and the man was out all day working and comes home at 6 pm and is tired. He's been like managing a team or just doing whatever his job is. So he comes home, maybe he wants to relax. Maybe he's not the empath in the couple. So he wants to relax, he wants to watch the game or some TV show for an hour before engaging with anyone, the kids or his wife. But the woman has been dealing with her own job. Maybe kids or what happened at school. Things that is on her mind and she needs to connect with him to remember that they are a married couple and they are a team, etc cetera. And maybe she is the empath in my example. I know it's kind of stereotyped but just to give it a start. What can you say about what it is, what does it mean to be an empath? What's really going on?
- Sweigh: There's a couple different entry points in what you've said. And so one is first recognizing there's two sets of needs. Both are valid. They're clashing in that moment. Both people can get their needs met, likely both can't get them met in the exact second because there's two different sets of impulses that both need to be honored. So that's the first thing to just acknowledge in your example. Totally valid that the partner coming home is burnt out, exhausted.
- Sweigh: We'll get back to the empath piece and empathy, but this is more about, how does one regulate their own nervous system? Do they need relationship regulation in that moment? Or do they need independent regulation, where they feel like they need to actually go off, tune in, get some space, regulate themselves. Then they're available for connection, right? And so those are two competing needs in this example. She wants relational regulation, like, "Oh, I need to feel you. I need to feel contact. I need to feel our togetherness, to feel the instrument of me feeling okay." In that moment, he's like, "I'm overwhelmed. I've been working, whatever is it. I need to wind down." He thinks he needs individual separate regulation in order to come together. So both of those are valid.
- Sweigh: Now I can imagine where the trigger might happen is she might get pissed of like -can I curse? I'm going to curse... "Where the fuck are you? I need contact right now and

you're disappearing." And that might trigger abandonment, you know, whatever it is. He might feel imposed upon by her response to his valid need for space. And now you're got two people triggered. When two people are triggered at the same moment and they're wanting different things, then you've lost the sense of we're on the same team that you're talking about. Because all of a sudden, you're the threat. They are each others threats in that example.

Sweigh: So the pattern interrupt, what can happen to negotiate that trigger? Especially let's call her an empath, let's add that piece into it. So let's say, if she's an empath, likely she's going to have a need. She's going to come home. She's going to be tracking, and she knows her partner, she's going to be tracking 'Are you available?' before anything comes out of his mouth. If he doesn't make eye contact in a particular way. If there's a tone of voice. Whatever it is that might subtly indicate that he's not available for that kind of contact, she's already on edge.

Sweigh: The mistake that she might make, on edge, feeling him not available when she wants that availability, is to go over and figure out what does she need to do to make him available so she can get her needs met. That's the fixing, right? So if she leaves herself and she's anxious, because her system's not getting the kind of contact that she needs. Maybe she's also concerned, "Gosh, are we okay? Is our bond okay? Are we safe? Is there a secure attachment here because you don't feel available?" It might be her personal trigger of abandonment but it almost might be a threat to the relationship so she gets heightened. And in that heightened distress, she might go over and try to fix it or make it okay for him. So that he'll show up the way she wants him to.

Sweigh: That pattern doesn't tend to work very well. Of the let me make it okay for you. Because he's going to feel more like, "I just need some fricking space. Just let me do my thing." But if he's not very skilled at being able to say, "Hey, this is what's going on for me. I actually just need 20 minutes of downtime, then I'll be totally available for the kind of contact that you're needing." Then she's going to get more heightened. She's not able to say what she needs. So she skips over that, she goes over and she tries to fix him, make it okay, change something, so that she'll get her needs met. He feels more imposed upon. He's going to try to be more avoidant.

Olivier: And maybe by that point, he's used to the situation. So already walking in the door is wondering, "Whatever I do is ...

Sweigh: Not enough.

Olivier: ... I can never be enough. Or I can never please her." And again, I apologize for kind of this stereotype but I get a lot of questions, also, where I see people saying, especially women saying, "Men don't know how to show up. They're not showing up. They're not present emotionally. I don't get the emotional connection that I need." And then he wants sex and then, you know, he's frustrated because he's not having enough sex. And she can't go there. So how can we do any better?

Sweigh: It's a great question. I just want to pause, because I notice even in the giving of that example, I'm like putting myself in the position of feeling the anxiety. So I can feel it in my own system as I talk about it. And the first step, actually what I'm doing inside myself, is just to feel compassion for myself in feeling those feelings and these two hypothetical people that aren't actually hypothetical. They're real people. And both of their needs are actually really valid. And so the first step is, can we find compassion? Can we actually pause enough? There's this Viktor Frankl quote about between stimulus and response, there is pause or there is a gap. I can't remember what the exact quote is but that's the invitation. If we can actually find that gap. Both of these people are feeling anxious. She's feeling anxious that she's not going to get contact. He's feeling anxious that he's not going to get space and going to be overwhelmed by her need because he's already feeling need and pressure and all of these things.

Sweigh: So the how we can do better is recognize the pattern. Pause. Get transparent. Own our own experience. Have compassion for the other person's experience. Either ask for what we want or need or meet them in what they want or need. I'll walk through all of that.

Olivier: Yes, awesome. Now let's slow down. Get transparent about what's going on for me, how do you do that?

Sweigh: Well for example, a deeper pass. Like if I was the man in that situation coming home, I might notice her anxiety to connect. I might pause. I might acknowledge it. I might say, "Gosh, I can really feel your desire to connect. And I notice for myself I walked in the door a little bit anxious already. So I need to own that. I walked in the door feeling a little bit anxious that I was going to be swallowed or overwhelmed by your desire."

Olivier: I would like to say to that man: before you open the door... You know, you just parked the car. Before you open the door, take a minute with yourself and check where you're at. And so when you walk in the door, you can say, "I'm excited. I'm tired. I'm ... this is how I feel."

Sweigh: Yeah. Right. So it's great, I think that's great advice. That's the gap. That's the pause. Okay, so "I'm feeling anxious. I'm about to walk in the door. Can I pause? Can I actually just do an internal weather report? Where am I? What am I feeling? What am I feeling on a sensation level in my body, in this moment? What am I feeling emotionally? What's actually happening inside this instrument that I am?" So it's pausing there. And she can do the same thing.

Sweigh: And so then, when they come together, rather than reacting with their two oppositional needs, they can out themselves. He can say, "Wow, I'm noticing I'm feeling a little anxious. And I want to be able ..." So this is where the relational skill comes in. To acknowledge her need and to acknowledge, "I'd like to be able to meet that need, but I actually can't right now. What I need first is a half hour of quiet." And then that's honoring, like, oh she gets to feel felt in that moment. He's feeling her but he doesn't have to give up what he needs to meet her need in that moment. He can actually honor himself. He can feel her. She gets to feel felt because he acknowledges it. And he's given her a time that he'll return. Which lowers her anxiety. And gives him what he needs, which is space. And also then the promise of returning.

- Olivier: Right. Time frame, specific time frame. And at the end of that half hour, check with himself again. Maybe he can ask himself, "Am I resourced now to engage? Or do I need another 15 minutes?" And communicate that.
- Sweigh: Yes. And if that's done skillfully where she feels -and I don't mean this in a pejorative term, but handled. She wants to feel handled a little bit in that situation. Meaning she wants to feel like her needs are valid, are welcome, are seen, are known, and are being received. It doesn't mean he has to meet those needs in that moment. That's where the confusion is. We think, "I have to give up what I need in order to meet my partner. And I'm going to die in that loss of self". Because it goes back to childhood. But either I do that or I have to keep my partner at bay.
- Sweigh: But there's this third thing that's an option. Which is the acknowledgement. The transparency. The honoring of my own experience. The naming. Like, "Hey, I see you other there. And I see you have need. And I want to meet that need and I care about you but I'm not going to be able to do it in this moment." She feels met and handled. Then there's a relaxation that gets to happen. Now this requires a high level of self responsibility. And a high level of attunement to partner on both of their behalf.
- Olivier: That's very clear, thank you. Tell me about her. My experience with empaths is that they would focus more on my feelings than theirs. They seem to be voicing their own needs, but they're voicing their own needs as kind of me... How does that work?
- Sweigh: Empaths are people with highly sensitive nervous systems. It's kind of like a subset of the HSP. The HSP is the highly sensitive person, that's a term that Elaine Aron coined. She's a really great researcher in this field. Empaths are highly trained to pick up all the signals around them. It's harder for empaths to stay in their own bodies and to be actually attending to what's happening inside. They've learned that often in childhood. It was like, classic training ground for an empath would be growing up in a family with addiction. It doesn't mean all empaths come from a family of addiction. Empaths is a wide range. I'm an empath. I didn't grow up in a family with addiction. But that's a kind of classic training ground, where you have to track what's going on with dad, what mood is he going to be in. Mom, what's their needs? You learn that this instrument - your body- is in service of the other. And so there's a way in which, in order for me to regulate my own anxiety...
- Sweigh: I'll give an example. My partner, a couple weeks ago, was feeling a little anxious. We're still relatively new in our relationship and I hadn't yet really learned to trust that he can be with his own anxiety about our relationship and that that's okay. And I've been in past relationships where the partner would get really dis-regulated when they were anxious about our connection. And so I got nervous about that. And so what happened when he started to get anxious, I skipped over what was going on for me and went into him and was trying to make it okay for him. Which he got really annoyed about. Thank God, which is a good thing. He was like, "What are you doing right now?" I'm like, "Oh, right. Good."
- Sweigh: Which then allowed me to come back, eventually after we talked through it, to come back to myself and go, "Oh, I got scared when I felt you anxious about our connection.

And I thought it was my job to reassure you." Versus, it's my job to stay in me, to trust the connection, to attend to, even naming, "Wow, I notice as you're naming your anxiety, I feel a little bit scared that you're needing something from me that I can't give." Or whatever it is, because we're at that level where we can actually speak in that transparent language and it brings down the stress versus heightens the stress.

Sweigh: But the empath's first response, when they feel other people's anxiety or other people's anger or other people's fear or other people's sometimes even grief, is, "Ah. This isn't okay. It's flooding me. I'm going into what's known in research as "empathic distress." Which -that's what I named in the beginning- which doesn't allow us actually to be compassionate. Because now we're flooded with our feeling about the other person's anxiety. And we're not even actually available to be present to what they're feeling because we can't even be present to what we're feeling.

Sweigh: So what the empath needs to do in that moment is pause. Feel themselves. Bring their own inner parent on board to do positive self talk to that part that's scared. To love themselves. To remind themselves that they're okay. Put a hand on the heart, a hand on the belly. Feel the feet on the ground. Touch themselves, their eyes look around the room. All the things that kind of like settle the noise. And from that place, get curious about your partner's experience in a way that you actually can receive what's going on for them versus be in that 'I have to fix it and make it better.'

Sweigh: Oops, it got a little frozen. Did you catch that last part?

Olivier: Yes. I think I did. So what I'm getting from you -and it's pure gold- is that the empath is so good at tracking somebody else, but needs a practice to know how to track themselves. It sounds like an ongoing thing to learn and grown.

Sweigh: Yes. Exactly. I think that empaths often don't even know what's ours and what's not. They just feel distress and jump. Because they're in a more anxious response, or numbed out. Empaths can be so flooded that they numb out and they go to avoidant. A lot of avoidants actually are empathic underneath the avoidance. And the avoidance is a protective mechanism. But the empaths are so quick to be over there in response to the stimulus that they're feeling. And the invitation is, can you slow down and even just feel your own body? And give compassion to yourself, so that you're available for an actual curious compassionate response to your partner's distress. Ironically, empaths end up becoming narcissistic. They're not trying to be. They feel everything. But because they're flooded with distress, then they're like, "Oh God, I have to make this distress better." They're not even actually able to see what is truly happening with the other person.

Olivier: You know, I actually recognize myself a lot in what you're describing. So the other person will say, "Well, you don't really feel me. I'm not sensing you empathic with me. And you're probably more of a brick." And I'm like, my problem is I'm tracking too much outside. And so, the other person would say, "Oh, you tend to be selfish, or narcissistic, because you're not responding to me. You're focusing on yourself." And actually, strangely enough, what you said just talks to me so well that I'm not here. You know my mom was having depression when I was really young, so I suffered from neglect and I

had to track her. So I recognize myself in what you described. And it's hard to know exactly what's going on with me. So this is golden.

Olivier: I think we're going to keep this short. Do you have any last tip you would like to give to people? Otherwise I'm going to ask you how they can learn more with you.

Sweigh: Just a tip in general? The key to everything is being willing to slow down. Being willing to slow down in those moments when we feel triggered, when our partner feels triggered, and to get curious about what's actually happening in our own bodies. And the sensations in our bodies and in our emotions. Offering compassion to ourselves in that moment. So then we can be available for actual connection.

Olivier: When we spin out, and I say spin out because this kind of acceleration process, when something is not working in the situation that's external, so it's kind of the story. It's what's happening. And we argue around what's happening. So how fast can we get out of what's happening in the situation and go down into what we're feeling. Is that what you're saying?

Sweigh: Yes, yes, yes. And it is a down. When we get distressed, we often go up and out. And so literally out of our crowns. So then the invitation is like, "what do my feet feel like right now? What does my belly feel like right now? If I'm sitting, what are my sit bones feel like in contact with the chair underneath me?" That coming down helps us even know what am I feeling in my body? And we can slow it down. And we're must more likely to have a response that's helpful from that place.

Olivier: Beautiful. Beautiful, Sweigh. So how can we learn more with you? Your training around that, your website?

Sweigh: Thank you. So my website is <http://thresholdshealing.com>. Although I'm in transition so I'm going to have a new website out soon, which is exciting. And yeah, so my info's there. The Empath Mastery Course, I'll likely do a version of that again in the spring. And so people can sign up, there's a place on the page to sign up as interested. And then I also do individual work, so people can reach out and apply to work with me if they feel called.

Olivier: Right, so the Empath Mastery is online but it's live. It's not pre-recorded. It's a class.

Sweigh: Yes, it's a class.

Olivier: Great. Thank you so much, Sweigh. That was golden.

Sweigh: Thank you. It was really fun to talk to you, Olivier. Bye.

Olivier: Bye.