

How to Give and Receive Empathy

Interview with Lynda Switzer

Olivier: Hello Lynda. I'm really excited to talk to you. How are you doing today?

Lynda: Hey Olivier. I'm doing well, thank you.

Olivier: Yeah, last time you visited, because you're from Calgary, Canada, right?

Lynda: Right.

Olivier: And a couple of weeks ago, we were walking on Santa Cruz Beach with our friend Matt and his two lovely puppies. And we were talking about empathy and I really loved your answers. So I really wanted to record you on this. So we're going to talk about how to offer and give and receive empathy when a trigger happens. But first of all, will you give us just a little background of who you are and what you do?

Lynda: Sure. Awesome. So I go by Coach Lynda. Lynda with a y, L-Y-N-D-A. And I facilitate workshops and I also coach families, couples, individuals, and organizations to up level their communication skills to dramatically change their relationships.

Olivier: Wonderful. Okay. So let's dive into this topic. I'm going to just give a little example that just happened yesterday. I'm going to set the stage for you...

Lynda: So yesterday we were at dinner with family, like my wife Lissa's aunt and uncle were visiting. It's quite sad because their son was a genius cello player. Unfortunately he killed himself when he was 25 because he started to have a disease that was affecting his way of using his hands. So we were loosely talking about it because they were on the tour to honor his cello, et cetera. I'm not going to go into the details about that. But she said something at table at some point that really touched me. She said, "It happened 18 years ago but it still feels like just yesterday." And I have chill right now in my spine just saying it, from just the impact of that reality.

Olivier: Bur we were at table and one of our friend was also visiting, and I'm not going to name her name. We'll call her by the letter K. So K responded to that with a story about her own depression and her suicidal tendencies and how she went through the eye of needle and found her spiritual enlightenment beyond that, in her change of career and everything. And it was very touching but at some points, I said, "Hey K, can you slow down, please, because I just want to make sure that for our aunt, we're not drilling into a topic that she might not really want to relive that well. And what she says she reverberates with me." And she was definitely kind of shut down, like, "Yeah, thank you for sharing but that does not relate to my reality what so ever."

Olivier: And so our friend K softened and said, "Oh, I'm sorry." But obviously something went wrong and the response was not appropriate. I want to know your take on it. What is not empathy? Because our friend K is a spiritual teacher and an empath. And I know why she said that. It's because she was very uncomfortable with the situation, the thickness of the air, the discomfort. So she kind of had to do something. We're not going to go into that. But first of all, what are the responses that are not offering empathy?

Lynda: Okay. Well, that's a really great question. And the situation that you described happens a lot. So can I speak to that situation first before I give you the things that I teach that are not empathy?

Olivier: Of course.

Lynda: And I'll segue one to the other. I really feel for your friends, first of all, who lost a child. That loss is really difficult to understand and really hard to metabolize. And the depth of grief that a person can experience with the loss of a child impacts them forever. And so it's not surprising to me that she said it's 18 years ago and it feels like just recently.

Olivier: I think your answer is perfect, demonstrating empathy. Tell me more...

Lynda: So what I also want to say for your friend K, who's an empath. And empaths have a really difficult time with this because they believe that they feel exactly what the other person feels. And this is a piece of information that empaths don't realize, breaks rapport with the other person. Because when we're in our situation and we're in our pain, the human experience is that we think that we're the only one who feels this way or we're the only one who feels this bad or this much difficulty or this much pain. And we're not seeing that other people feel that way, too. Or have felt this way, too. Or that what we're feeling is common and we just see our own pain. And we see ourselves and our own pain.

Lynda: And we want to be seen and heard and understood in our own pain. And once we feel that acknowledgement, we could be open to hearing other people's experiences. But when someone replies with their own experience, it often gives the message that ours is diminished or that it hasn't been acknowledged. And that's really hard for a person who's in pain. So I understand why the empath is offering it, not out of lack of care or not out of lack of concern or not out of lack of resonance. I mean, the empath is saying, "I resonate with what you are feeling. I get you. I feel you." And unfortunately it's not being received by the person in pain in the same way as what the empath intends.

Lynda: And that happens a lot. That happens a lot. And that happened to me. And it still happens to me, because we have habits of communication and ways. And our hearts desire is to really connect with this person and to show them that we hear them and that we understand what they're going through. And we really feel them.

Olivier: It comes from care.

Lynda: Yes-

Olivier: It comes from care.

Lynda: ... absolutely it comes from care. I agree, totally. So that kind of response and all of the others that I have that I identified as not empathy, all come from an element of care and they also sometimes come from something else. They also come from our own discomfort.

Olivier: Yeah.

Lynda: So when somebody shares something really heavy with us, especially if we really care about that person, we can really feel their pain. And we really actually don't want to feel that much pain. We don't want them to feel in pain if we care about them. And we don't want to feel in pain because they're in pain. And so whatever we do next is an attempt to diminish the pain. To make the pain go away. Make it go away, make it stop, make it stop.

Lynda: So the care, like you said, it motivates the response, sometimes leads us to do something like agreeing. So we agree with the person who makes the concern or the complaint. And this is also known as colluding. And in the moment, colluding can feel fantastic to the person who's in pain. But there are usually consequences. So right now, if you and I colluded on something about an upset with another person, what it would do is sort of alienate that other person. And it would make them wrong. And then what happens after you make up with that other person and you're all fine and good with them, but I still am left with this impression that you and I have shared about this other person not being good in some way. Being wrong.

Lynda: So then there's residual, because... Let's say we do that in a family situation. With a sister-in-law or brother-in-law or mother-in-law, father-in-law, right? And then afterward, we all have to be one big happy family. And you've made up but I'm still here thinking, "Well that person did this to my friend, Olivier." So collusion has a cost most of the time. And the other thing we like to do is advise. Give advice.

Olivier: Definitely.

Lynda: Giving advice comes easily and again, what's the intention? Like "I've been through this, I know how to fix this, I'll just tell you the hack. I'll just give you the hack. Why would you not want to know the fast way to make it better?" And sometimes we do -and I'm excellent at this because I was trained in my coaching certification that I should ask a lot of good questions. Instead of giving advice, I should ask a lot of great questions.

Lynda: So I developed my ability to ask probing questions. But what ends up happening is the feedback I've received is that when I ask a lot of probing questions, often times the person perceives that as my attempt to change their feelings about the situation. Or if I ask a lot of probing questions about what they're doing or how they chose to handle a situation they're sharing with me, then it makes them think that I expect them to change their behavior because I'm interrogating them. It comes across a little bit interrogative. Does that make sense?

Olivier: Yes. You know what, I'm actually making notes. Collusion, advice, or trying to change their feelings or expect them to change their behavior, is not empathy.

Lynda: Those things are not empathy. That's right. And we call that last one, asking lots of questions, to be like interrogating. Evaluating is the title I've given to the other thing that is not empathy. And this would be when we give somebody some psychoanalysis. Actually, you gave me a complaint. A one sentence complaint earlier. Can you do that one again and I'll show you what kind of response?

Olivier: Yeah, it was ... "Yeah, why do you do that? I feel like you don't care for me.!"

Lynda: "Oh, okay. Well, you know, because I've been reading a lot, sounds like maybe that's an attachment wound and maybe you're an anxious attachment style."

Olivier: Ouch.

Lynda: What do you mean? That doesn't feel like empathy?

Olivier: Hell no.

Lynda: You don't feel warmly toward me?

Olivier: Well it's definitely I don't feel heard or understood.

Lynda: Okay. So I psychoanalyzed.

Olivier: I don't feel safe.

Lynda: Yeah. I evaluated you and I psychoanalyzed you. And that didn't create connection or safety between us in this conversation, right?

Olivier: Yep.

Lynda: And so I call that evaluating. Another one is preaching. It's sort of also in the same category as teaching. And it's really just telling the person what they ought to do but with a sort of lecturing or persuading tone. And with lots of logic, like, definitely using lots of logic to persuade. Another one would be... give me another one sentence complaint and I'll give you another example. Some concern that you have.

Olivier: Yeah, "you don't care for me." Or yeah, "you're not showing up for me. Or you're not protecting me."

Lynda: "Oh, well. It can't be that bad. We just hung out yesterday, right? Like protecting you from what? Are you talking about gremlins? What are you talking about that I need to protect you from?" How does that feel, Olivier?

Olivier: Ouch! It's like also in the conversation is displaced. So it feels like you're trying to allude, diminishing.

Lynda: Yeah. So the downplaying and diminishing is a great way. You figured it out. So the next one I call, if you're taking your notes, is downplaying. And that's minimizing the other person's reality. So it's telling them "it's not that bad." It's diminishing to them. And I also used a secondary one when I made a joke about the gremlins. And that's called distracting. And that's laughing at or escaping the feelings and just distracting from them. Like you told me that you don't feel protected so I actually made fun of what do you mean by protection.

Olivier: Yeah like "seriously, what's the danger?" Yeah.

Lynda: Yeah, exactly.

Olivier: I'm talking about my emotional safety. And you're talking about, what? What's to be unsafe about?

Lynda: Like ouch, that hurts. That hurts. Because I've just actually ... If I am vulnerable enough to share with you that I'm feeling not connected to you or lonely or not protected, I don't want someone making a joke about that. I've really stepped out. I've stepped out to share that with you and when I step out like that toward you and I get that kind of response ... How did it feel? I'll ask you. I know what it feels like for me, but how did it feel in your body when I said those things?

Olivier: Well, it feels yucky. But also it feels like a displacement. It's like I'm coming with charge, with juice, with, "Hey, there's something I want to work out with you. I'm not okay and can we connect? It's like can you connect also?" And it's like to the side, I don't exist, it's kind of an I don't exist anymore.

Lynda: Yeah. And if you had to feel into your body, where would you feel that sensation of feeling displaced or put to the side? Or like you don't exist?

Olivier: Well, for me it creates -that's more specific to me- but it creates kind of a brain fog or confusion. And then heart. In the heart. It's like a negation of my heart. So ouch. And actually I contract and I retract and I want to go away.

Lynda: That's what I saw. And I saw your body do this. And that's what I'm asking people in my workshops to bring an awareness to, because we're sort of disconnected from our bodies a little bit in this society right now. And what I'm asking people to do is tune in. When you received that verbal response, where do you feel that in your body? Do you feel it in your solar plexus? Do you feel it in your chest? Do you feel it ... a lot of people feel things in their throat. This is our communication chakra. So this is where we recognize how we speak and are expressed but also how we hear and how we are heard.

Lynda: And so when we don't feel heard, we can sometimes feel contraction in our throat as well. And you did this with your body. Your shoulders went like that. So contraction is a great awareness. To notice that you feel a tightening. And we sure don't feel loose and natural. And we sure don't feel like opening more to this person we're having this conversation with. And often this is someone who's very dear to us and who we want to have much better connection with. Not less connection with.

Olivier: That's the paradox and an excruciating pattern of that because we want more connection, it creates more disconnection. It's horrible.

Lynda: Yes.

Olivier: It happens even in a stronger way with the people we care the most about. Like our partner, our main relationship, our lover, family members. It can spin out for days, for months, for years. So that's why that topic seems so key to me. Because it only takes a little bit of shifting to actually mend that and help with that.

Lynda: Absolutely. Absolutely. So-

Olivier: Any other point? We talk about collusion, advice, changing their feelings, interrogating, evaluating, psychoanalysis, teaching, preaching, downplaying or distracting. Anything else?

Lynda: And so I have some more and I call these below the line. So the ones that are above you could do and it will create some damage. But you might be able to repair and come back from it. The ones below the line are super destructive. And the ones that are above the line ... I mean, they don't always have to be super negative. Like for example, you're a friend of mine and a wise person with loads of education and experience. And if I had a problem, I might come to you and ask you to hear me out on my problem. And we could speak about it and I might be actually asking you for advice. And I might be really open to hearing you say, "You know, yeah. If I experienced that, I would probably feel the same way, Lynda, and here are some ideas about what to do. Or let's brainstorm ideas to what to do."

Lynda: And so those things are not wrong or bad. And actually if I did have an attachment style wound or an attachment style or attachment wound that I didn't have awareness around and this was an idea of something that you had a lot of experience and training in as my friend, I might want to hear that information and education myself. Or learn from you. Or buy a book. Or something like that.

Lynda: But the ticket is I'm not actually willing and able to hear any of that from you until I know that you understand. I need to know that you get me and that you've got my back. I need to know that you hear me and see me and understand me in my pain with this. In other words, empathy. That you empathize with me before I'm willing to listen to the advice, to the questions. Like I love questions. I love when people ask me questions. It makes me think more deeply about my own issue or problem. But not until I know that they get me and they understand me.

Olivier: Right. I love what you're saying. It's like advice or teaching or asking questions, all that is good. But not as a first step. As a second step. The first step being like, ... Like you said, nobody is ready to receive any teaching advice or questions or anything or downsizing or whatever until they know that the other person gets them. So how do we demonstrate that?

Lynda: Yeah.

Olivier: Sorry. Let's finish with your list. Yes.

Lynda: Okay. You want to go back to the list, below the line. So below the line are things like denying, judging, blaming, shaming, and comparing. So denying just diminishes the experience. I see this all the time when a little kid falls down. Parents say, "You're okay. Get up."

Olivier: It's like the kid is screaming. Now they might not have broken anything and they may not be mortally injured. But it would be okay for the parent to say, "Let's have a look, sweetie. What's going on? Oh." And check it out. Check all the bones. Press on the spot. Give it a kiss better. "Okay. Are you ready to keep walking now?" Like lets acknowledge the feeling because actually I noticed that the waterworks and the screaming and tears turn off as soon as attention is paid. That's all that was a call for. It's just like, "Whoa, I fell down. I scared myself. Can you pay attention to me?"

Olivier: And as soon as we give that, then we can assess the situation. If something needs to be done, we do it. And if there's no blood or broken bones, then we probably can carry on. But when we say, "You're okay. Get up." Well, that's rather jarring. That says apparently my feelings are not validated. I just had a scary experience. I might be hurt. I don't even know if I'm hurt. And I just wanted actually some attention and support here. So denying can be really destructive to the relationship, as well as judging. Which is like criticizing the other person's point of view. And in a way, by saying you're okay, you're criticizing their point of view. The person who fell and cried or screamed is saying, "I'm kind of not okay here. Something happened. I'm not alright."

Lynda: And blaming would be, "Well, that was your own fault. I told you to wear your better boots and you wore those stupid flip flops and that's why you fell on the ice."

Olivier: Ouch.

Lynda: Not empathy.

Olivier: We did that all the time!

Lynda: And shaming is like implying the person is bad or wrong. Like, "What were you thinking, choosing flip flops on a day like today?" What were you thinking is one of the most destructive phrases, because what it really is implying is that the other person was bad or wrong. And we're shaming them for a decision that they've made or a thought that they've had or maybe a feeling that they're experiencing.

Olivier: It's like you feel bad, now. It's your fault. Don't put it on me. I don't want to feel it, so get that away from me. It's your fault.

Lynda: Exactly. And comparing just demonstrates preferential treatment. So you know, let's go back to the kid who was walking with you and falls. "You're okay, get up, why did you wear those shoes? What were you thinking? I told you to wear your boots." And then, "Your sister wore her boots and she's doing fine."

Olivier: Ouch.

Lynda: "Why can't you be more like her?"

Olivier: Ouch.

Lynda: Oh that didn't work for you either? Right. I mean, it sounds ridiculous when we talk about it like this. And you and I have fun with it. Except that where did all these sentences come from? We've all heard them and sometimes we've said them. And we heard them maybe from our parents. And maybe we hear them in the grocery store. Or we hear them walking down the street. Or we hear them at the beach. We say things like this all the time and we have lots of different reasons for wanting to say those things. But what the main message today is that those are not empathy, obviously. And the ones below the line, that I just talked about, those five are particularly damaging to the relationship. And they're really, really making withdrawals from the love bank between those two people. It's destructive. It's really destructive.

Olivier: Great. Okay, that's very specific and precise. I love it. Clarity! So what I'm getting, like the main takeaway I'm getting from all this list is skipping that step of allowing ourselves to feel the feelings.

Lynda: Good catch. Good catch, right? It's skipping the step of allowing ourselves to feel the feelings and it's also in our response skipping the step of letting the other person feel their feelings.

Olivier: So how do we do that?

Lynda: Yeah, we're saying, "Your feelings might be big and I can feel that you've got feelings and it's uncomfortable for you. And I can see that it's uncomfortable. And by the way, it's uncomfortable for me that you're uncomfortable." So I'm going to quickly say something to try and make everybody feel more comfortable. You and me. And in Non Violent Communication, it's called being the "fix-it-jackal", where we give a solution to fix the situation so everybody can feel less pain right away. And that whole idea of less pain right away for everyone motivates most of our responses. And that's why I say we have good intentions, and it comes from care, as you mentioned, when we respond.

Lynda: So empathy is a social emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions and circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others such that we can respond

in a sensitive perceptive and appropriate manner with communication and support. That definition comes from the book *The Art of Empathy* by Karen McLaren.

Olivier: Great.

Lynda: The most comprehensive definition I've heard. And it includes more than just feeling what the other person is feeling. Like it says that we understand their emotions but also their circumstances and their intentions and their thoughts and their needs. Not just their feelings but what's underneath the feelings. What are the needs that are driving the feelings? And this is a basic concept in Non Violent Communication teaching as well is that needs are underneath the feelings. So it's not so much the emphasis anymore on the story of what happened or even on the feelings that are presenting, that are screaming loudly for attention. It's what's underneath the feelings as well that's driving those expressions. So maybe ask me another question about that. We can do an example. Another example.

Olivier: Yeah, I mean, I'm circling back to the first situation I was mentioning with my wife's aunt whose is still grieving the loss of her child. And she wants to be able to mention it, not avoid the obvious elephant in the room for that couple. And so it would be uncomfortable to not talk about it. But then it's not safe to talk about it, because everybody have their own reaction. And so I'm taking that example but also it's so common for couples, especially couples that are beyond the honeymoon phase, where we can give a pass to each other more easily. But beyond that, when it becomes more long term, even small things can be re-triggering...

Olivier: I'm thinking another situation where my wife was coming in the door after a hike and I was concerned about a file. And I said, "Hey, can you look at this? This is urgent. We need to make a decision." And she was like, "Wow, I feel attacked! Don't push that on me. I need a breather." So we all have our needs and our values. But when a situation happens like that, what would be the appropriate response instead of jumping into trying to fix the situation or having the other person be onboard with our agenda?

Lynda: Wow, I heard so many things with that.

Olivier: I know, sorry.

Lynda: A lot of stuff. So let's go with this most recent example that you said. Your wife came in from a hike and you had something you were working on and you really wanted her opinion or advice on and you'd like for her to look at this file and give you some feedback. And you met her at the door with the request right away to look at the file. And her response was, "I feel attacked," she said?

Olivier: Yes.

Lynda: She said, "I feel attacked." And anything else?

Olivier: Yeah, she was feeling disconnected. She wanted to move away. Yeah, mostly it was like, "Oo, get away from me!"

Lynda: Yeah, so her body language was like that was too much. She wasn't ready to take that.

Olivier: Yeah.

Lynda: So we can perceive that as criticism. And when we feel criticized, our response is one of two things. We either become defensive. "Oh, I wasn't trying to attack you. I just wanted to get your opinion on this file." Or we stonewall, which is like we go into ourself. That person just rejected us. I'll just lurk over here now, I'll go away somewhere and I'll sit in the corner and suck my thumb until you come and find me. Or I'm not going to make an effort to reach out to you again or then we get stinking thinking happening.

Lynda: And stinking thinking is when we start telling ourselves some stories that are not really generous stories are Brenne Brown would call them. They're not generous stories about the other person or about ourselves. Like, "Wow, I was just trying to ask her opinion about something. Apparently that's not something that's important to her." Or, "Wow, she doesn't really care to participate in my important project that I really just wanted her advice on." Or, "Why didn't she perceive that as an honor that I was asking for her input?" Et cetera.

Lynda: And we go into our own story and we really get caught up in our own story. So when we get into a situation where there's a miscue or a misfire, especially with a loved one like that, the first thing we want to do is give ourselves some empathy.

Olivier: Right.

Lynda: Go into self empathy. And just acknowledge our own feelings and our own needs. Like, "Whoa, that was a bit harsh. Okay. I'm feeling tender right now, actually. I notice that I'm feeling a little hesitant and a little tender. And I want to just give myself a little bit of love here, because that didn't go like I wanted it to go. And it felt a bit crunchy. So I'm feeling a bit of tenderness now. And now I'm feeling hesitation to maybe figure out how to go back and do it differently. And to ask for a do-over, like mulligan, like they do in golf. Like can we have a do-over sweetie?"

Olivier: Yeah.

Lynda: So a do-over, if the person is open to it, you now have the feedback from them that said that wasn't how I wanted to be greeted when I came in from my hike. And we can try it and do better. So I would say that that's a great strategy. And if you want to bring empathy into your do-over, then when you ask for a do-over you might say something like, "I got it, that when you came in, it sounded like you needed a bit of space and you maybe felt some overwhelm when I met you at the door with my request."

Olivier: Not only that but she's been actually processing deeper stuff for herself after a therapy session. That's what she was processing on the hike. So there's more than meets the eye in a few seconds, right?

Lynda: Right. And that's the whole story that we don't know. What if she hadn't told you that that's what she was doing on the hike and you didn't know that? Then you got met at the door with, "Oh I feel attacked." And you make it all about you. Like "maybe she doesn't like me. Maybe she doesn't care for me. Maybe she doesn't want to have any interest in my project." And here it is, not about you at all. She was doing her own process, working through her own stuff, and her head was busy and full and she needed to just exhale. Like maybe she was feeling upset and maybe she was coming home now and needed just to be held in silence in order to decompress from her emotional processing that was happening while she was on her hike. We don't know.

Olivier: So it's interesting because then we have two people that are coming with different needs. One is already an emotional processing need. The other one is trying to figure out something important, like a big a family decision. We need to address this otherwise we're going to be in trouble. So it's not like none of them are wrong, neither me or her. It's just like we have different needs that are, in this moment, completely colliding and crashing and not working together.

Lynda: Completely, yes. I mean everyone is essentially walking around, trying to meet their own important needs every single day with everything they say and do. We are just in our brains, we are meaning-making machines and our whole being is just in this experience to try and meet our important needs. So that's all we're always doing. And so if we can start actually seeing people and ourselves as beings who are just trying to make an attempt to make meet our precious needs, making desperate attempts sometimes to meet our precious needs, then we could take a little of the sting away of personalizing it. We don't have to take it personally when we're met at the door like that.

Lynda: In fact, if we were really high in our love bank with that person, in other words we know they care about us. We know that they know that we care about them and we have lots of credits in the love bank, we might receive that and go, "Whoa. Thank you. Thank you. Like thank you for giving me that information." And then we might make a different offer. "Would you like a hug? Or would you like space?"

Olivier: Yeah.

Lynda: And we walk away completely okay in our own being because we know that isn't about me. That's not about me. And I can show up just in empathy for that other person.

Olivier: Yeah, one thing I'm really getting is like, in order to connect, we first need to stop pressing our own agenda around our needs. And even put t on pause.

Lynda: It's hard, though. Because while she's trying to meet her important needs, you're trying to meet your important needs, too. And maybe your need was, like you said, for connection. For mutuality. For partnership. For team work on the decision that needs to

be made, that it impacts her as well. For cooperation. For consideration. Maybe it's just your way of bidding for time with her. Maybe you haven't had some quality connected time with her. And so maybe that was an attempt to meet that need as well. So as you said, here we are just trying to meet our own needs and sometimes they're coming up against each other.

Lynda: So really important to have an awareness of what our own needs are. And to remember that other people are just trying to meet their own needs, too.

Olivier: Yeah, the key word that you said first was self-empathy. "What is really going on with me when the others have their own experience?" I'm thinking of the aunt with her grief. It's like "okay, I feel uncomfortable right now. There's no way I can relate. Or I do relate and there's so much I would like to say." Maybe that's just the first step. Just saying the answer would be, "Wow, there's no way I can imagine that. The thing that comes to mind is I went through an episode of wanting to kill myself as well. And so everything around that comes up in my mind right now. And I'm not going to share that, but just so you know, that your statement impacts me a lot."

Lynda: Yeah. That's great. That's great. And a grief coach taught me a survival strategy or survival sentence that says, "I can't imagine how you must be feeling." She said every time somebody tells you about a loss, you say to them the sentence, "I can't even imagine how you must be feeling." And start with that. And then you can go from there. "I mean, I'm guessing that it's very painful. I'm guessing this hurts a lot."

Olivier: Guessing, yeah.

Lynda: "I'm guessing you're feeling sad about this still. I can hear ... I'm hearing that you're still feeling sad about this. And that it still impacts you, you know?" And that's empathy. So I think that the trouble that empath's get into is that it sort of comes across like they think they know how we're feeling.

Olivier: Yeah.

Lynda: And as soon as somebody tells us they think that they know how we're feeling, it diminishes our feelings. It's minimizing our experience, essentially. And I know that's absolutely not the empath's intention. Like clearly they have a gift. And that's not their intention at all. Not even in the least. In fact, the opposite is their intention. And yet that's unfortunately how it ends up coming across. So, "I'm guessing you might be feeling ... " or "It sounds like ..." or "That sounds scary ..." or "That sounds uncomfortable ..." or "That sounds... (blank)" You know, those kinds of sentence starters can be a lot less abrupt or abrasive to someone who's experiencing some pain and who's just shared that pain with you vulnerably.

Lynda: Those are the sentence starters that I encourage people to use in my workshops and that we train people to just memorize. "I'm guess you might be feeling... (blank)."

Olivier: So with Lissa coming home from a hike, I don't know if that happened or not, if it's a real story, but-

Olivier: Yes.

Lynda: Yeah. And so, she came to the door and then your response could be, "Oh, I'm guessing you're feeling sensitive. And I'm wondering if maybe you need space or if you need touch right now." And so we're now guessing not just at the person's feelings but we're going deeper to what are the underlying needs? "I'm guessing you might be feeling sensitive and I'm wondering if maybe you need touch, like a huge, or space." Et cetera.

Olivier: Yeah, space or telling me more about what is going on for you. It's like, "Oh I'm noticing you're contracting right now. What is going on?" And she might say, "Yeah, I feel emotional." Or, "It's hard for me to tell you right now. I'm not much in a good space." The response would be, "do you want space or do you want to tell me more about it?"

Lynda: Right, an offer. And offer of both with a choice.

Olivier: That doesn't presume that we know what the person needs.

Olivier: Right. It does not presume what we think the other person needs. I think that's so key.

Lynda: And it does not presume what the other person needs based on what we would need if we were in their shoes.

Olivier: Yes. The keyword is presume, yeah. We presume how they feel. We presume what they need. We presume what they think.

Lynda: So I love, again, the sentence starter that says "I'm guessing you might be feeling ..." because when I use the guessing and might, it just gives me a little bit of space to not have them think that I'm telling them that I know or how they should be doing something. I'm not 'should'ing on anyone. I don't 'should' on people. I don't want to 'should' on you. So "I'm guessing that ..."

Lynda: And another way that I've heard it in language with people who are very close to me, who are well versed in this, they'll just say something like, "Whoa, that sounds... (blank)." Like, "That sounds scary." Or, "Whoa, that sounds overwhelming." And so they're not trying to tell me that I should be feeling that way. But they're sort of telling me that they're hearing my emotion, right? And they're also telling me that they resonate with that. When I hear somebody say, "That sounds scary." That tells me, "Oh, they hear my fear. And they're telling me that maybe they would feel fearful if they were in my shoes." They're not coming out and saying that and they're not promising or guaranteeing it. But it does sort of sound like they're resonating with me. They're attuning themselves to me. We're connected. We're tuned into each other.

Lynda: They're listening to my channel that I'm broadcasting on. Which is what we are just dying for. We're longing to feel seen and heard and understood. We're longing for it.

Olivier: That's where connection comes from.

Lynda: Yes.

Olivier: Trust. Trust and connection come from the sensation that we have that the other gets us. So pushing their agenda won't work. The presumption that they have about us won't work. None of that will create trust and connection. Right. So curiosity-

Lynda: Curiosity without interrogation. And curiosity after we've tried to acknowledge the feelings.

Olivier: Right.

Lynda: So just acknowledging the feelings. It's amazing how much energy can be diffused and dissipated just by acknowledging feelings. It's shocking actually how much. Like just hearing you acknowledge my feelings will let my body relax a little and the contraction to lessen. And I can lower my shoulders. I can ease up on my breath. I can have access to my voice. I might even just want to ask for a hug or volunteer arms or burst into tears if I get the sense that you see me and you hear me and you understand me. Which by the way doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with me.

Olivier: Right. So how can we demonstrate empathy even if we don't agree?

Lynda: So then that's just entering the other person's experience and their world and guessing how they might be feeling. Which isn't about how you're feeling or how you might be feeling or how you think they should be feeling or how you would love to fix how they're feeling. It's really just being in their experience. Even if they cut somebody off in traffic and you're in the vehicle with them. And they're really mad at the other driver but they actually made the mistake, you know? You can say, "Whoa, that was scary." Right? Or, you can say, "Oh, that was uncomfortable." Or, "I'm guessing you're feeling frustrated." Or, "You sound frustrated." Like while they're yelling at the other driver, "You sound frustrated." In your mind, you know that you think that you saw that they made some kind of driving error that created that upset. But that's not important.

Lynda: If this person is someone you care about, the connection is more important than being right about the driving or the situation or whatever it was. It's like, "You sound frustrated. That was scary." You might ask a question. "I'm guessing you didn't see that person there." But that could come after. And then you're also giving them some leeway and then they could say, "No, I didn't even see them. I didn't even see them. They came out of nowhere." Or whatever happened. And then it's like, "Yeah, that was scary." And we have this shared experience now where we're in this together against the scary experience or the problem, rather than we're against each other about the problem.

Olivier: Yes. Instead of we're against each other about the problem. Yeah. So I wrote down, first, self-empathy. What do I feel? What do I need? Acknowledging their feelings. Don't presume. Ask. For that one, I'm thinking of something because we had a triggering moment with my wife a few weeks back. And I said, "It sounds like you have an

impatient part of yourself that wants to fix our relationship. Or us being further along than what we are. Is that true?" And she said ... she took a few seconds, and she said, "Yes this is true and this is incomplete."

Lynda: Great.

Olivier: So that was great. A great moment I think because it acknowledged what I thought, what I presumed about her, but it left enough space for her to fill all the blanks that I could not even imagine. And it was great for me to know that. To know the rest.

Lynda: Yeah, that there's more. So she has some great communication skills and it's clear that your love bank has a lot of deposits in it, because she didn't get offended when you said to her a little bit of a diagnosis. "It sounds like you have an impatient part of you that ..."

Olivier: That's right.

Lynda: Right? So she wasn't offended by that, a little bit of a diagnosis, and so if the love bank is not so full, you might want to choose a sentence that sounds something like, "Are you feeling impatient?"

Olivier: Ah, alright.

Lynda: Now I'm using a question but I'm using a question to inquire about the person's feelings and I'm really guessing what they're feeling. It's a sideways way of guessing what they're feeling without telling them what I think they're feeling, that I hear them feeling.

Olivier: Yes. Well this is so, you know like fine-tuning... It's a training! Clearly we're not taught that. We're taught the opposite. So I think we're going to leave it at that for today. And how do we learn all that with you?

Lynda: There is so much more. There is so much more. So many things that you brought up are reminding me, too, of my most recent certification. So I'm recently certificated by the Gottman Institute as a Couples Therapist Clinician. And it's been really fascinating with the couples I'm working with to bring in the Gottman scientific research. The Gottman Institute is one of the foremost authorities in the world on what makes marriages work and what makes them not work. John and Julie Gottman out of Washington. And so, when I have that statistical empirical evidence scientific behind explaining why these things work, it's very compelling actually. So that's been really fun. And I see the overlap with all of it. With the Non Violent Communication pieces and the language, the NLP neuro-linguistic programming kinds of nuances to the wording and the language that we've been talking about today, Olivier.

Lynda: So you can find out more, of course, on my website. It's <https://coachlynda.com/> and Lynda's spelt with a y. And a lot of testimonials and comments and all of my events and everything that I'm holding that are open to the public, if it's a public event, a training, a workshop, et cetera, and there's always an event posting on Facebook as well.

Olivier: Oh yeah, and your Facebook page to find it. I suppose you must have a link on your website. But also, what would they tag to find your page?

Lynda: CoachLyndaSwitzer.

Olivier: Just one last question that came to mind. Because we said it's like an art, almost, to de-learn how we've been programmed and offer something different. Often the criticism with NVC is, "oh, you're criticizing my delivery. Or I need to have a different delivery in order to be proper in my talking." What would you have to say about that?

Lynda: I've heard that. I've heard that criticism of NVC and I think my understanding, and I might not have it correct, but I think my understanding of it comes from that there's such a prescribed method of responding or communicating that requires specific words to be used and so on. And I like to be a little more loose and natural about it in regard to how I communicate with people with empathy. Like some of the examples that we covered today. So we gave actually five or six different ways of giving somebody empathy that were not strictly according to a script in NVC. And they don't sound stifled or uncomfortable or out of our natural way of speaking. We often say something like, "That sounds... (blank)." That's not unusual sentence configuration or structure.

Olivier: Yeah and for me, it's a different intention. It's like, what is my intention? Is my intention whatever comes out of my mouth should be fine and not questioned ... I shouldn't do any more effort than that. Or do I care about this relationship to not damage it, first? Also improve myself. And for me it's like a realization that the way we're taught language is not helpful in relationships. Maybe it's great in corporate business and stuff and to be achievers. And for that matter, we're taught to suppress our feelings in our culture.

Olivier: And this approach for me is not a matter of, "oh, I'm not using the right words." It's like, "how can I better communicate, be more precise and specific, and take responsibility? So that not only I'm able to communicate what I experience but also I take responsibility for how it lands for the other one." In the sense, "you know, that's how I am and you should accept me the way I am." No, it's more like, "okay, we're in communication. I'm taking responsibility of my communication so that the other understands me and I understand the other." And for me, it's way beyond delivery. It's like a real primary intention that's fundamental.

Lynda: Yes. Beautiful. I love it.

Olivier: Ok, on that note.

Lynda: Well, what is that saying? Something about "seek first to understand and then to be understood." That's a famous quote by someone.

Olivier: Okay, thank you so much, Lynda. And I hope to talk to you soon as well on other topics.

Lynda: You're welcome. It was a pleasure. I enjoyed our conversation. Thanks Olivier.

Olivier: Bye bye.

Lynda: Bye.