

SYMPATHY VERSUS EMPATHY

by L.M. Shannon-Chaillet © 2013



Let's take a moment to discuss two simple words that you will experience in our canine therapy dog competition club for 4-H'ers with disability. Those two words are *sympathy* and *empathy*.

Sympathy, as you may have already perceived, is a feeling of pity for someone or something. In fact, you might even experience shame, disappointment or even embarrassment for that person and their dilemma. Sympathy is a feeling of helplessness in the fact that there is nothing that you personally can do to help the person through their life's dilemmas.

Yet, it is sympathy that can be, and most often is, a great life motivator in guiding a determined empathetic person into designing a solution for those same life dilemmas.

As you may have already perceived, empathy covers the human emotions ranging from feelings of concern that creates a desire to help that person, to knowing what the other person is thinking or feeling by observing his or her body language. Empathy is the compassion and understanding what the other is feeling or going through in his or her stage of life.

"Empathy comes with a hug (you're sharing the "feeling" and potentially a helping hand (again touch). Sympathy comes from a distance (a commiserating, but not sharing) and often is a social formula (I'm sorry that happened, whatever it was.)

"Very young children can tell when their mothers are sad and oftentimes will spontaneously hug their mothers. They experience empathy – the sense the "feeling" and respond to it with touch.

"Our dogs will often know we are tired, sad, unhappy, and come lean or rest against us; they certainly know when we are up and happy and excited, because they dance with us. Dogs don't know sympathy. They experience empathy. A reaction of physical nature to the body posture or facial expression.

"Co-workers, distant family, friends, and acquaintances – all say, "I'm so sorry" when you experience a loss, but they are not empathetic. They are expressing a formulaic sympathetic politeness. They may genuinely be sorry – but it is distant. Our dogs know we're different, and come in closer – they can be sympathetic, but have to go to the empathic response."¹

So, now I want you to think about this ... If you perceive a 4-H'er with one or more disability as someone who is to be pitied, someone for whom you should wait upon hand and foot, or someone from whom little should be expected or demanded ... then a 4-H canine therapy dog

¹ Mary Belford, NewFL; Thursday, December 9, 2010; 1025 A.M.

SYMPATHY VERSUS EMPATHY

by L.M. Shannon-Chaillet © 2013

competition club is not for you. Sympathy does not facilitate the 4-H'er with a disability to learn life's lessons through dog training techniques.

Empathy is the tool that motivates the Team Instructor to set "*high goals in small steps*"² for our 4-H'er's dog projects by guiding his or her 4-H team into learning how to accomplish dog exercises independently. Team instructing is giving an assigned 4-H team your time and your knowledge regarding on how to become successful through the practice of his or her canine exercises by using his or her mental and physical skills under your supervision, your tutelage and your hugs.

² Linda Pries, *Best Friends 4-H Club's Good Sportsmanship and Figure Eight Class Instructor*, January 8, 2011