

Overview:

This activity is based on Jamil Zaki's concept of the empathy gym, which he discusses on the podcasts *Hidden Brain* and *Clear + Vivid*. In those episodes, Zaki describes how he developed empathic skills as a child of divorced parents with two very different sets of values and priorities. He also discusses the positive and negative aspects of empathy in addition to providing some techniques that anyone could use to increase their level of empathy. This activity adapts one of those techniques, which he calls "Disagree Better," and provides participants with tools for better understanding and empathizing with individuals who they may disagree with.

Background and Information:

This activity was adapted by Lindsey Macdonald, CILMAR graduate assistant, from an episode of NPR's *Hidden Brain* podcast as well as an episode of Alan Alda's *Clear + Vivid* podcast (see citations below).

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Describe the negative and positive aspects of empathy.
2. Develop empathy for those who are different from them.

Time:

1 hour

Group Size:

Pairs

Materials:

- [You 2.0: The Empathy Gym episode of Hidden Brain podcast.](#)
- [Jamil Zaki on Empathy and How to Hack It episode of Clear + Vivid podcast](#)

Note: Facilitators should ask participants to listen to both podcast episodes or read their transcripts before the beginning of the activity.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Empathy

- To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
- To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group

Other Skills:

Friendship, Teamwork, Diversity & Inclusion, Leadership

Facilitator Activity Instructions:

1. Begin the activity by discussing some of the main points from the two podcast episodes with the entire group. The facilitator should ask participants the following questions:
 - How does Jamil Zaki define empathy? What are the three components of empathy that he describes?
 - Zaki describes parochial or in-group empathy. What does that mean? How might parochial or in-group empathy inhibit someone from developing empathy for someone who is different than them?
 - What are some of the strategies that people can use to increase level of empathy?
2. Break up participants into pairs. Each person should pair up with someone who is different from them in some way, or who has a different opinion than them on a particular topic. You may choose to use the [6 Differences](#) activity to create pairs, or you may also help participants choose partners by suggesting a particular topic that the participants may disagree on. That topic does not necessarily have to be controversial (like a political issue). It could be something like a favorite type of movie, favorite sports team, veganism/vegetarianism vs. omnivorism, etc.
3. After participants have paired up, ask them to do the following:
 - State/describe their opinion on the particular topic
 - Interview each other about how they came to that opinion. They should ask each other questions like:
 - When did you first develop that belief/opinion?
 - Is there a particular event or set of events in your life that contributed to you to developing that belief/opinion?
 - Are there any people in your life who contributed to you developing that belief/opinion?
4. After the pairs have finished interviewing each other, debrief with the following questions:
 - What did you learn about your partner after your conversation?
 - How did you feel about your partner after your conversation?
 - How was this approach different than other conversations you've had where you disagreed with the other person?
 - How might this style of disagreeing help people more easily develop empathy for each other?
 - Do you think you'll try to use this style of disagreeing in future contexts? If so, when and how?

Related Tools:

Similar tools:

- [Bridging Behaviors](#)
- [Empathy for Those We Hate](#)
- [Tribalism and Empathy](#)