

# Classroom Ideas to Help Learners Develop Empathy Toward Older Adults

A guide to engaging today's students in developing geriatric sensitivity



# Classroom Ideas to Help Learners Develop Empathy Toward Older Adults

Engaging today's students in empathy development and sensitivity toward older adults is essential. Empathy is a vital skill for those pursuing careers in healthcare or human services as these individuals might care for aging patients. This training also helps young people understand what it's like to be an older adult, which is important no matter what career path they choose. Use this guide to incorporate new, innovative ways to teach students geriatric sensitivity and empathy toward older adults.



## Empathy:

The ability to understand and share the feelings of another. This soft skill is commonly valued in the "helping professions," like counseling and social work, but can bring great value to teams in all professions by helping develop camaraderie and trust.





## Idea 1: Take an Empathy Self-Assessment

Completing a self-assessment helps learners reflect on how empathetic they are and identify areas of improvement. After completing other activities from this guide or your own lesson plans, have students complete the self-assessment again to see if they gained additional empathy skills.

**Take this self-assessment and decide for yourself if you need to improve.**

- |                              |                             |                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a general interest in the welfare of other people.                                |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a warm personality.                                                               |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am flexible when dealing with situations.                                              |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am alert and can pick up on how others are feeling.                                    |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am able to listen objectively to other people.                                         |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am able to cope with egocentric personalities.                                         |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am sought after by other people to listen to anxieties and fears.                      |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | My friends would not call me self-absorbed.                                              |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am able to focus on the person who I am speaking with without getting distracted.      |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I understand the difference between sympathy and empathy.                                |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a variety of life experiences that help me have a broad understanding of people.  |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Others see me as adaptable, flexible, and spontaneous.                                   |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am able to maintain my own health and don't get wrapped up in other people's problems. |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | I am patient and kind.                                                                   |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Others would describe me as humble, not conceited.                                       |

**Empathy self-assessment from the Geriatric Simulator's curriculum**





## Idea 2: Spend Time with an Older Adult

A key element of empathy is seeing yourself in another person's shoes. To develop geriatric sensitivity, have your learners spend time with an aging adult. Ask each student to do a few of the activities below, then complete a reflection exercise.

### **Activities to do with an aging adult:**

- Shop for groceries
- Interview them about their childhood, especially as it compares to yours
- Perform household chores, like cleaning the kitchen or doing laundry
- Take a walk
- Play cards or a board game



### **Reflection Exercise:**

Journaling is an excellent way for learners to reflect on any experience. Have students write about activities they took part in, what they learned from the activity, what they noticed about the adult they were with, and what they think and feel regarding the experience.



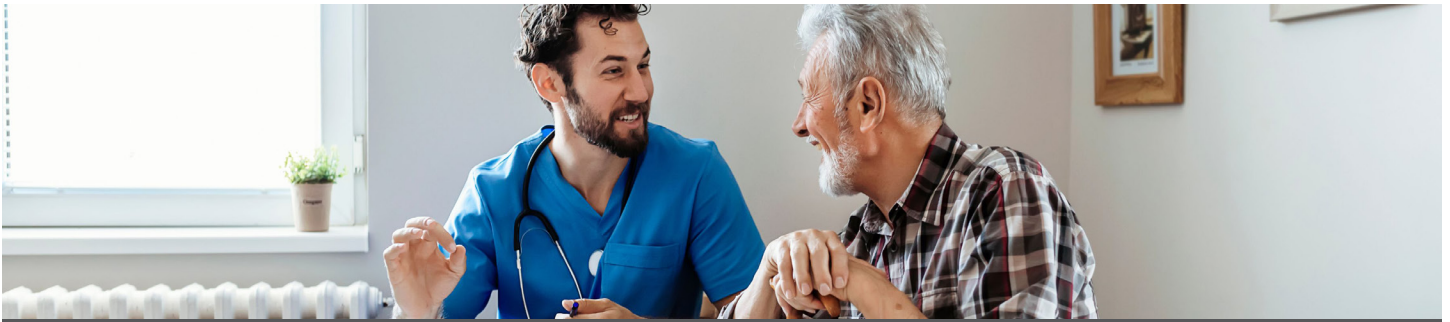
## Idea 3: Explore Careers in Geriatrics and Gerontology

During this activity, learners explore the wide range of professions associated with the older adult population, learn the key skills that are needed to success in these occupations, and perhaps discover a career they are passionate about.

1. Research careers in Geriatrics and Gerontology
2. Choose one career and look for key information:
  - a. Education requirements
  - b. Average starting salary
  - c. Typical job duties
  - d. Occupational outlook
  - e. Needed skills
3. Present the occupation to the class

### **Examples of geriatric-related careers:**

- Gerontologist
- Integrated Care Manager
- Geriatric Nursing Assistant
- Memory Care Practitioner
- Geriatric Case Manager
- Family Services Coordinator
- Geriatric Pharmacist
- Hospice Worker
- Medicare Office Manager
- Nursing Home Administrator
- Geriatric Speech-Language Pathologist
- Home Health Aide



## Idea 4: Use Articulation Statements

Sometimes communicating empathy comes easily, but other times it can be challenging. However, it's a skill worth mastering, and it can be learned. Like any skill, mastery comes with practice. There are several types of statements that can articulate empathy:

### Naming

Name the emotion the older adult feels. This can help decrease the intensity of the situation.

### Understanding

This type of statement acknowledges that you hear what they have said.

### Respecting

This type of statement reinforces the older adult's actions and could also be thought of as praise.

### Supporting

This type of statement shows a commitment to the older adult and is very powerful.

### Exploring

Asking a focused question prevents this strategy from being too obvious.

After explaining these statements to learners, give them a type of statement and a context for the statement. Then, have them provide an example of that statement in that context. For example, a naming statement related to an older adult being afraid of a procedure might be: "I understand you are afraid to go under anesthesia during this procedure." Other contexts to give students could include frustration, receiving an injection, cultural differences, medication regimen, and pain.





## Idea 5: Implement Scenario-Based Learning

Walking in the shoes of an older adult, or attempting to, helps increase learners' ability to empathize. Scenarios are one way students can do this right in the classroom. Provide learners with a detailed scenario and key questions for them to consider. They can answer these questions as a class or in a written reflection activity.

### Scenario Example:

Mrs. Fisher is a 58-year-old female who started dialysis four months ago. She is trying to get used to her challenging schedule of nearly three full days per week preparing for her treatments, driving to and from the health center, and the inconvenience of being "hooked up to that machine for hours" each visit. She does not like that it keeps her from participating in activities she likes most and away from the comfort of her own home so regularly, but that is a sacrifice she is willing to accept.

She admits that she has battled with weight issues and diabetes for years, but she has been trying to adhere to the new rules and regulations for a proper diet. She states that she finds it somewhat complicated, and her memory is not as good as it used to be. She gets confused when the dietitian bombards her with information about what, how much, and when to eat. Also, she is on a fixed income, and it is tough for her to stick to her food budget with all of these new nutritional requirements. With the new restrictions, it seems like everything is more expensive. When looking at her meal diary, the dietitian "scolded her" about eating so much macaroni and cheese. Apparently, "it's bad for me for all kinds of reasons." But the dietitian does not understand that this is her "famous recipe that everyone asks for," and it is a dish she always makes for birthday parties and church functions.

Sometimes, the dialysis staff treats her as if she has no care about her health or treatment plan, but she knows she must remain healthy to continue to do the things she likes and avoid the need for a kidney transplant in the future. Despite all this, she is doing her best to follow these complicated dietary rules.

### Key Questions:

- How would I live with this condition?
- How would I manage my daily activities?
- What would be the most challenging aspect for me to manage in this scenario?
- What would give me happiness if I were Mrs. Fisher?





## Idea 6: Incorporate Geriatric Training Tools into the Classroom

Give learners a chance to “walk in the shoes” of an older adult with training tools that simulate age-related challenges. The geriatric training tools listed here provide interactive, real-world experiences that engage students and help them relate to aging individuals.

### GERIATRIC TRAINING TOOLS

To learn more visit [www.realityworks.com/geriatric-training-tools](http://www.realityworks.com/geriatric-training-tools)



#### Geriatric Simulator

This award-winning wearable simulator enables users to personally experience a variety of age-related physical challenges, such as stooped posture and restricted range of motion.



#### Geriatric Medication Management Simulation Kit

This unique learning aid helps students build empathy and understanding of the challenges experienced by older adults who have multiple medications to manage.



#### Geriatric Sensory Impairment Kit

This kit includes Hearing Impairment, Geriatric Arthritis, and Geriatric Tremor Simulators that enable users to experience common sensory challenges older adults face every day.



#### Dementia Simulation Experience

Use this simulation experience to help learners understand the effects of dementia, how a person with dementia can feel, and how to care for and communicate with individuals suffering from a dementia-related condition.



#### COPD and Mobility Challenges Simulation

Create interactive, immersive scenarios for your students that help them walk in the shoes of older adults facing mobility and respiratory challenges.



## Idea 7: Don't Forget to Reflect

Whether your learners interview an older adult, research geriatric careers, or complete tasks while wearing the Geriatric Simulator, reflection is key. Provide time for students to reflect on their experiences. Ask them what went well, what could be improved on, and what they noticed. Not only does reflection help underscore core concepts, but it helps learners develop soft skills, like critical thinking and reasoning, which are in high demand no matter what career they pursue.

## Geriatric Training Resources from Realityworks

**Realityworks**  
Live It. Learn It.

### Career Opportunities in Gerontology

**What is Gerontology?**  
Gerontology is the study of aging and its effects on individuals and societies, focusing on physical, mental, emotional, and social changes as people grow older. In relation to healthcare, gerontology consists of providing medical treatment and offering strategies for disease prevention to older adults.<sup>1</sup>

**Why Choose a Career in Gerontology?**<sup>2</sup>

- Demand:** The aging population is increasing, leading to a surge in demand for gerontology professionals.
- Stability:** Gerontology offers stable career paths with opportunities for growth and fulfillment.
- Impact:** Careers in gerontology provide the chance to positively impact older adults' lives.

**Career Paths in Gerontology and Salaries**<sup>3,4</sup>

| Career Path                   | Salary    |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Geriatrician                  | \$222,720 |
| Geriatric Physician Assistant | \$215,733 |
| Geriatric Pharmacist          | \$146,299 |
| Geriatric Social Worker       | \$83,408  |
| Geriatric Nurse Practitioner  | \$79,577  |

**Educational Requirements**<sup>1</sup>

**Degrees:** Bachelor's or master's in gerontology, social work, psychology, nursing, sociology, public health, or related fields.  
**Advanced Degrees:** Master's or doctorate in gerontology or related disciplines for career advancement.  
**Practical Experience:** Internships, volunteer work, or research opportunities enhance qualifications.

**Skills Required in Gerontology**<sup>1</sup>

**Knowledge-Based Skills**

- Understanding of Aging Processes
- Problem-Solving
- Healthcare Communication
- Organizational Skills
- Flexibility

**Interpersonal Skills**

- Interpersonal Communication
- Compassion
- Patience
- Respect

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### Free classroom posters:

Use our downloadable posters and infographics to generate discussions about a variety of career topics, including careers in geriatrics.

Get your posters by visiting

[www.realityworks.com/resources/realityworks-interactive-posters](http://www.realityworks.com/resources/realityworks-interactive-posters)

### Geriatric program implementation:

Use the resources on these pages to learn how our 21st Century geriatric training tools engage learners, help teach foundational skills, and help students discover careers.

Learn more by visiting

[www.realityworks.com/geriatric-training-tools](http://www.realityworks.com/geriatric-training-tools)

### Free career exploration lesson plans:

Use these lesson plans to engage your students in topics related to high-demand career exploration, soft skill development, STEM concepts, and more.

Learn more by visiting

[www.realityworks.com/resources/free-lesson-plans](http://www.realityworks.com/resources/free-lesson-plans)



For pricing and ordering information, visit

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