



# EMPATHY EXERCISE

identifying what we know  
about our participants' lived  
experience



## empathy exercise

Before designing mental health support, we must recognize that people are more than a statistic— they embody unique stories. The purpose of the Empathy Exercise is to help you step into their shoes to access their lived experiences. Why do their lived experiences matter, and why should you pay attention? Lived experiences help you identify key aspects of a person’s life that may affect the mental health challenge you are trying to solve. They may also reveal to you channels for providing care, training, or education that you haven’t considered.

The challenge here is to resist generalizing. We suggest that you identify a specific individual whose story you want to focus on. If that individual is not representative of your entire target population, then do this exercise multiple times with different individuals in mind until you have most of your population represented.

## instructions

First, select the person whose lived experience you want to explore. Write down their name, age, and gender.

Next, answer the questions from the perspective of that person. We recommend using a variety of processes to answer these questions. Use the boxes next to the questions to write and draw. Think about the person’s five senses: what might they see, hear, touch, smell, or taste on a daily basis? Sketching your answers is a great way to expand on this creative process. If you conduct this exercise with a team, have each team member complete the exercise on their own first.

Then, discuss your answers. Where do your answers converge? Where do they differ? How might these insights inform the way you design a solution?



related tools: mental health problem definition, evaluation planning workbook, problem chain analysis



## empathy exercise

Step 1: Think of a person who experiences the problem you want to address.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Community / neighborhood: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 2: Answer the following questions from the perspective of this person, based on what you know about them. Remember to resist judgment.

Where do you live? Who do you live with?

What does a typical day look like for you?

What are your responsibilities? Who is depending on you?

What makes you happy or excited?

What makes you sad or angry?

What are you afraid of?

What are you ashamed of?

What is most important to you?

What causes suffering for you? How does it affect you?

How have you tried to make your suffering or pain go away?