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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Empathy showing empathy to victims, avoiding victim blaming, and the “himpathy”

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: MENTAL HEALTH

Module No.12

by:Innovation Frontiers

Innovation Frontiers
Mind is the limit

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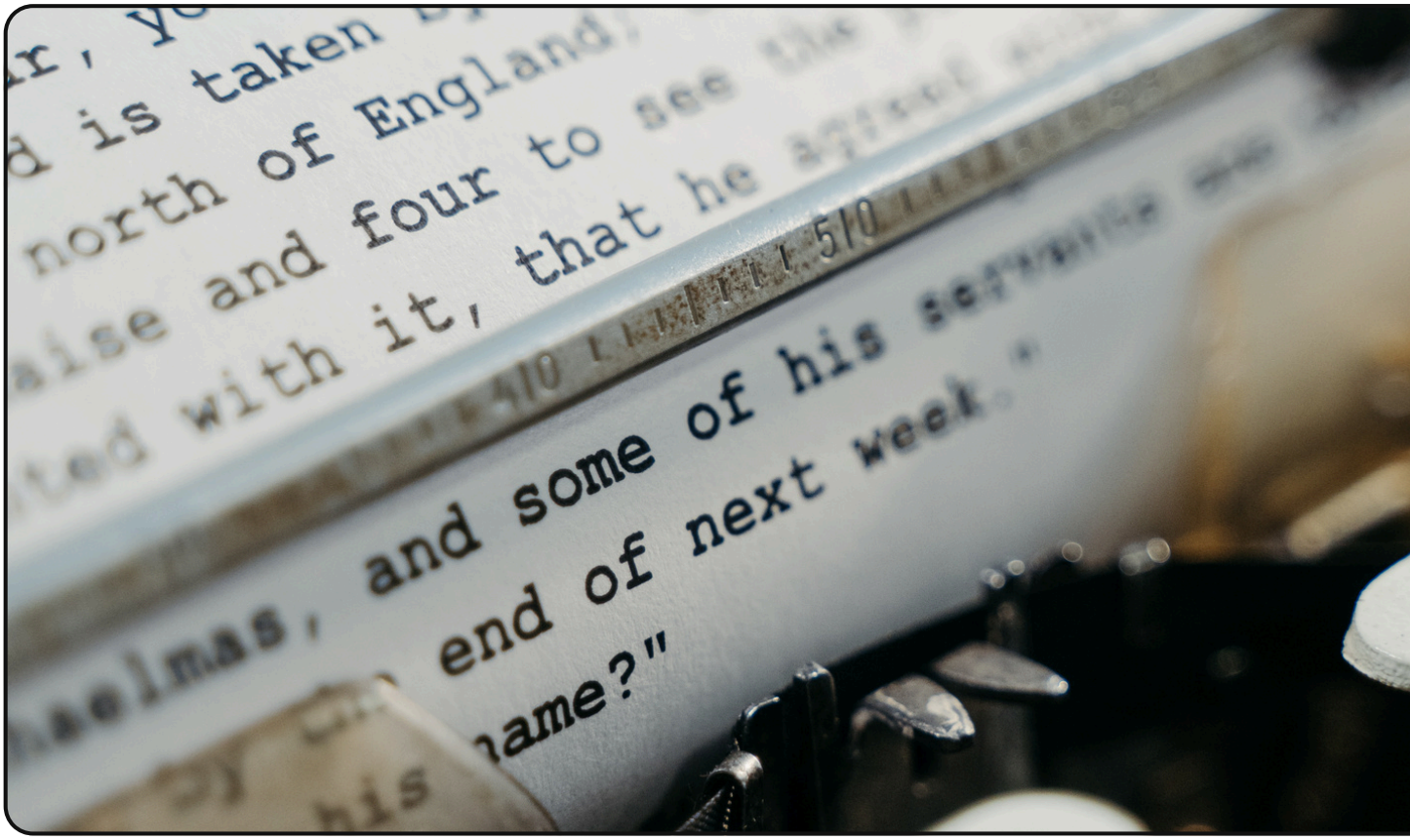


1. Why this subject matter

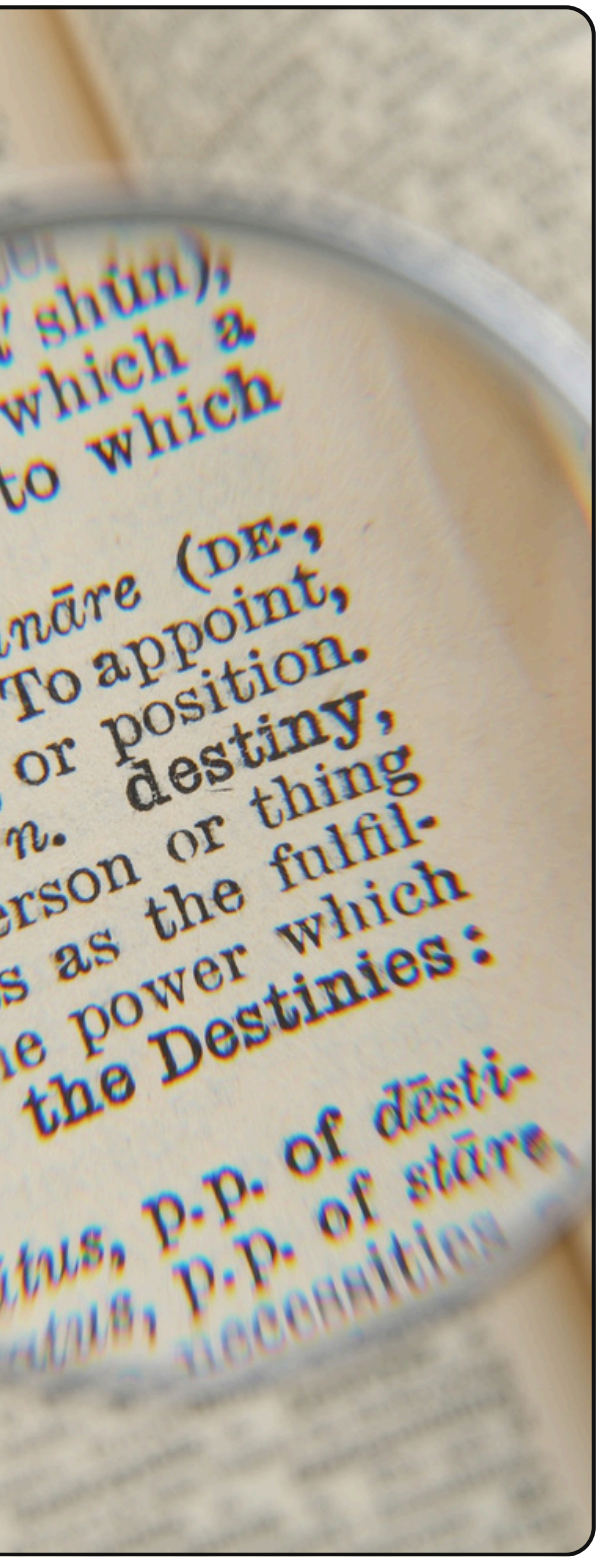
Empathy matters when journalists report on gender-based violence because it shapes how stories are told and how survivors are treated.

- **Respect for survivors:** empathy helps journalists avoid language that blames or shames victims, and instead centers their dignity and safety.
- **Accuracy and context:** understanding emotional and social realities leads to more nuanced reporting, highlighting causes, impacts, and systemic issues rather than sensational details.

- **Minimizing harm:** empathetic reporting reduces the risk of retraumatizing survivors or exposing them to further danger.
- **Public awareness**: stories told with empathy encourage audiences to understand the seriousness of gender-based violence and challenge stereotypes.
- **Ethical responsibility:** empathy supports fair, responsible journalism that prioritizes human impact over shock value.

Overall, empathy helps journalists report in a way that informs the public while protecting and respecting those affected. ”

2. Learning Outcomes



By the end of this Module, the learner will be able to:

- Understand the meaning of “empathy” in journalistic practice;
- Recognise the most common mistakes that journalists make in the field of empathy, while reporting on gender-based violence;
- Understand the meaning of “himpathy” in journalism and how to avoid it.

3. Definitions

Empathy is the ability to understand, be aware of, be sensitive to, and experience another's feelings, thoughts, and activities. It is the foundation of caring, helping people to communicate and to build healthy social and professional relationships. Those who are empathetic tend to be more self-aware and attentive to the needs of others. It strengthens social awareness and helps reduce bullying, prejudice, and racism. Ultimately, empathy forms the basis for fair, peaceful, and compassionate societies.

However, there are some differentiations that must be made. Empathy is affective, somatic and cognitive, meaning:

- **affective**: the ability to understand another person's emotions and respond appropriately.
- **somatic**: having a physical reaction in response to what someone else is experiencing.
- **cognitive**: understanding another person's mental state and what they might be thinking in response to a situation.

Moreover, empathy, sympathy & compassion are all different:

- **empathy**: an active attempt to understand the other person. It is the general ability to take another person's perspective and feel the emotions of others.

- **compassion**: when the feelings of empathy are accompanied by the desire to help. Feeling another person's pain and wanting to take steps to help relieve their suffering. The word itself derives from Latin and means "to suffer together."
- **sympathy**: a feeling or expression of sincere concern for someone who is experiencing something difficult or painful. It does not involve sharing the other person’s feelings though.



4. Psychological and neurolinguistic mechanisms

Empathy allows us to build rapport with others, helping them feel heard and understood, while our words and body language reflect their emotions. Taking another person's perspective - the ability to understand their thoughts and view a situation through their eyes - can strengthen this connection even further. But can we develop our empathy?

Researchers suggest that empathy is something people can intentionally develop and prioritize. Spending time with individuals who are different from ourselves often encourages a more empathetic perspective. Studies also indicate that reading novels can strengthen our ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings. In addition, meditation has been shown to promote mental states that enhance empathy. Introspection can also be beneficial, involving thoughtful reflection on our own feelings and thoughts. As we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves, it becomes easier to understand others.



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5. Typical errors in journalistic practice



Empathy for whom?

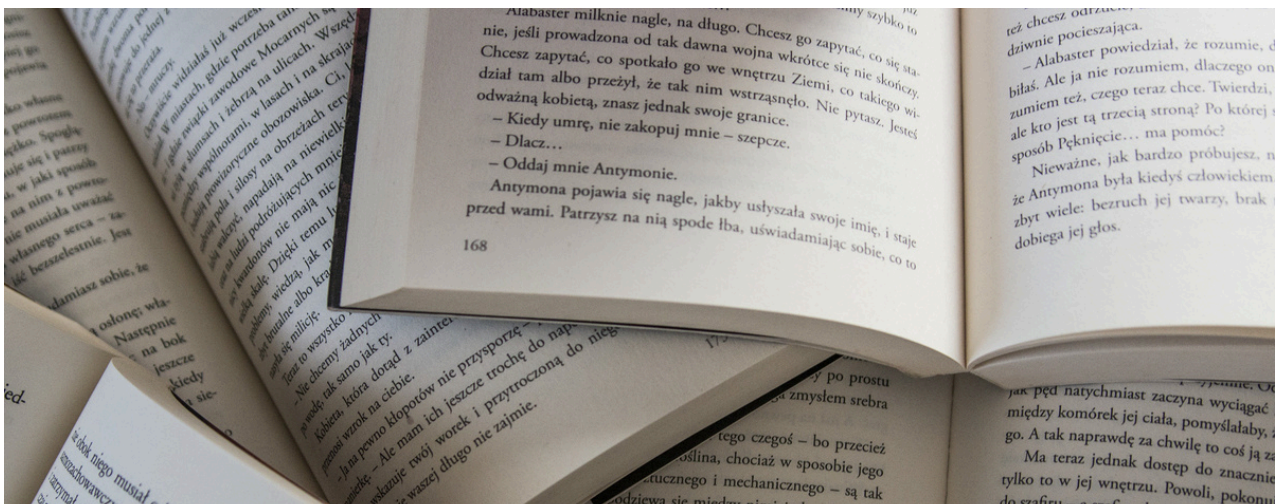
Most people are likely to feel greater empathy for people like themselves and may feel less empathy for those outside their family, community, ethnicity, or race. We should always strive to be empathetic towards everyone – but does that mean we should have equal empathy for the abuser and the victim?

Examining the abuser's mental health and the circumstances that helped make him an abuser is closely tied to the critique of the patriarchy as a whole. Dangerous patriarchal beliefs such as "men are superior to women", "women should obey their husbands", "boys will be boys" and so on shape men's minds from a very young age. Feminism calls for the destruction of this very dangerous system that nurtures violence and toxic gender beliefs and wishes to protect everyone – not just women – from its real-life consequences.

However, comparing a man that has fallen victim of the patriarchy to an actual gender-based violence victim is very dangerous: it blames the violent crimes of an individual on a societal structure, removing any individual responsibility and leading to lighter sentences and injustice for the victims.

This tendency of justifying the abusers' actions in the journalistic practice, but also in society in general, leads us to our next point: the "himpathy" phenomenon.

"**Himpathy**" in journalism describes an undue level of sympathy directed toward the alleged male perpetrator, often at the victim's expense. This occurs when coverage gives greater attention to the accused person's reputation, career, or future instead of the harm suffered by the survivor. Common signs of himpathy in reporting include:
highlighting the perpetrator's accomplishments (such as describing him as a "promising student" or "respected professional"),
stressing the negative consequences for him (like damage to his career or distress for his family), questioning or downplaying the victim's experience, and
creating an imbalance in which the accused is framed more emotionally than the survivor.



This matters because himpathy can redirect public sympathy away from survivors, reinforce harmful stereotypes, minimize the seriousness of gender-based violence, and overall lead to the systemic gaslighting of the survivors. Responsible journalism seeks to avoid this by focusing on facts, impact, and fairness, without prioritizing the perpetrator's perspective.



And why do we feel the need to side with the abuser?

- **Allegations** can be seen as a threat towards authority in general, or an institution/political party/football team etc. Especially for abusers of authority or respect, the readers/viewers are less likely to believe and support the victim.
- **Identification and self-protection:** some men may identify with the accused and fear that similar allegations could be made against them: supporting the abuser can feel like protecting themselves or their social group.
- Another expression of the same fear can take the form of the **"not all men" rhetoric,** a very simplistic view which neither contributes any useful information to the conversation, nor proposes any solutions. It is stating an obvious fact – not all men are abusers/rapists. Portraying an abuser as an abuser in media, and not as a tragic figure that just so happened to commit a crime because of the circumstances, is just stating the facts – it is not an attack towards all of the male population.
- **Belief in traditional gender norms:** societal expectations about masculinity - such as dominance, control, or emotional restraint - can normalize harmful behaviors and make them seem less serious.

- On a similar note, there is **minimizing** the severity of the behavior. Some individuals may not fully recognize certain actions as violence, especially when cultural narratives downplay harassment, coercion, or emotional abuse
- **Social conditioning and stereotypes:** persistent myths - such as assumptions that victims exaggerate or that accusations are common - can influence reactions and shift sympathy toward the accused.
- **Group loyalty and solidarity:** loyalty to friends, colleagues, or members of the same community can lead people to defend someone they know, sometimes before fully considering the evidence.
- **Fear of social consequences:** challenging another man's behavior may risk conflict, exclusion, or loss of status within peer groups.
- **Cognitive dissonance:** especially when the accused is perceived as "a good person," people may struggle to reconcile that image with allegations, leading them to defend him to maintain their prior beliefs.

It is of course important to note that not all men respond this way, and many actively challenge abuse and support survivors. Increasing awareness, education, and accountability can help reduce these patterns and encourage more constructive responses.

6. Other real – life impacts of the “himpathy” and the victim-blame phenomena

“Himpathy” is not limited to news audiences; it can also appear within the justice system, including among judges, leading to real-life consequences such as more lenient sentences. It is also not expressed only by men. Women may display himpathy as well, often positioning themselves as “good women” who defend “good men” while criticizing or discrediting those perceived as “bad women.” This dynamic is frequently linked to internalized misogyny.

In some cases, there are perceived social rewards for adopting these attitudes. Within patriarchal structures, women who conform to expectations - by being compliant, avoiding complaints, and accepting subordinate roles - may receive approval or validation, which can reinforce and perpetuate such behavior.



7. Positive reframing

Journalists can avoid himpathy and victim-blaming in coverage of gender-based violence by adopting careful, ethical reporting practices that keep the focus on facts, impact, and accountability.

Here are some practical steps journalists can follow:

- Center the harm, not the perpetrator's reputation: avoid emphasizing the accused person's achievements, character references, or "bright future," which can unintentionally shift sympathy away from the survivor.
- Use neutral, precise language: replace phrasing that implies doubt or blame (e.g., "she claims," "why didn't she leave?") with factual descriptions that do not question the survivor's credibility.
- Avoid unnecessary details about the victim: irrelevant information about clothing, past relationships, or lifestyle can reinforce stereotypes and suggest responsibility.
- Provide context about gender-based violence, including data, patterns, and expert perspectives helps audiences understand the broader issue rather than viewing cases as isolated incidents.

- Protect survivors' dignity and safety: avoid identifying details unless there is clear public interest and consent; consider the risk of retraumatization.
- Be aware of implicit bias: reflect on how framing, headlines, images, and story placement might unintentionally create sympathy for the accused.
- Consult ethical guidelines and experts: many journalism organizations provide standards for reporting on violence and trauma-informed interviewing.
- Balance without false equivalence: present verified facts while avoiding emotional framing that privileges the accused over the survivor.
- By prioritizing accuracy, sensitivity, and context, journalists can inform the public responsibly while minimizing harm and avoiding narratives that reinforce himpathy or victim-blaming.



Empathy is a powerful journalistic tool for connecting with survivors, understanding their trauma, and reporting with dignity. However, empathy must never be confused with excusing harmful or violent behavior. Providing a "false balance" by overly sympathizing with the perpetrator's background, career, or emotional state (himpathy) is not empathy; it is a narrative bias that minimizes the survivor's experience and detracts from the abuser's accountability.



8. Case study

Read the following articles, covering the same topic:

1. https://www.sportsnet.ca/baseball/mlb/sportsnet-terminates-zaun-allegations-inappropriate-behaviour/
2. https://www.foxnews.com/sports/ex-mlb-player-says-his-life-after-baseball-ruined-sexual-harassment-allegations-cant-get-job

- What are the main differences between the 2 reporting styles?
- How does one of the two articles makes the reader feel “himpathetic” about the abuser?

Modification for group settings: find a national gender-based violence case. Then try to find one “himpathetic” and one objective article covering the topic.

9. Practical Exercises

01

"Tell me more, tell me more - Did she put up a fight?"

Objective: Write an article from 3 different points of view and un-learn the victim-blaming and himpathy tactics.
Duration 35 mins (5 mins for the video and 10 mins per article)
Materials: YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPygnkUTf4 , pen & paper or digital Word document, highlighter

Instructions:

- Watch the drive-through date scene from the movie Grease, with the characters Danny and Sandy.
- Write 1 short "himpathic" article about it, i.e. focusing on Danny's feelings, his pure intentions, his undeniable love for Sandy and how he regrets hurting her feelings.
- Write a 2nd article, this time focusing on victim-blaming, i.e. highlight how Sandy had agreed to go on a date with Danny, comment on her outfit, etc.
- Now write the 3rd and final article, empathetic to Sandy, describing the facts accurately and without justifying Danny's actions. Avoid overly emotional language. Tip: check this Module's suggestions.
- Expected Output: 3 different articles about the same scene.

Modifications: if there is enough time you can also use a relevant image, proper title, and select the platform you would post it.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- Which type of article (or combination of) are you more likely to write as a reporter or encounter as a reader?
- What are the most problematic parts of each of the first 2 articles? Highlight the specific words.



02

“Football star’s career destroyed!”

Objective: Spot the “himpathic” parts of the article (text analysis, discussion)
Duration: 10 minutes.
Materials: -

Instructions: Read the following text and spot the “himpathy” parts.

“Prominent football star’s career destroyed – read what happened on the night of the incident!
Mr X., the 18-year-old new player that recently transferred into your favourite football team, saw his future career crumbling after an unfortunate incident that took place last Friday.

Allegedly, the young scorer was having a night out with teammates at a local club, celebrating the teams’ latest win, when an unknown young woman approached him and asked him to dance. According to other club clients, things escalated quickly and the two ended up in a hotel room nearby. The next morning, he realized the woman had left without saying goodbye – and he would soon find out she had already filed a lawsuit against him in a police station. The woman claims she was roofied, possibly at the hotel room, and was almost unconscious when Mr X. tried to have intimate relations with her.

Eyewitnesses confirm she was the one who approached him first and was acting flirty, and his teammates highlight he would have never done such a thing. “Mr. X is an incredible guy – always gentle and caring. He also gets hit on by multiple women every time he goes out – why would he be so desperate to try and roofie her? Our team stands with him, and we are positive the truth will come out”. The fans have already voiced their concerns about the woman’s intentions, and we are now waiting for the official court decision.”

Open questions for discussion. Please note that this is a judgement-free zone – feel free to honestly share your thoughts.

- Which were the most “himpathic” parts (words, phrases etc) of the paragraph and how did they shift the blame from the abuser to the victim?
- Have you written an article/social media post in a “himpathic” way as well? If yes, were you aware of it? If yes, was it a deliberate choice to attract the audience, or maybe an expectation from your supervisor, or even a standard tactic for your workplace?

03
The Other Way Around

Objective: explore the opposite side of victim blaming – what would a truly aggressive towards the abuser article would look like?
Duration: 30 minutes.
Materials: song "Quarterback" by Kira Isabella https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUQ2ltrdkTw , lyrics to the song (online), pen & paper or online document

Instructions:

- Listen to the song and read the lyrics.
- Why did the "no-name girl" agree to get in the van and ended up getting drunk, and later on, abused? Try to understand her and get in her shoes - discuss the societal pressure, lack of experience, lack of support, etc.
- Write a short article about the event, actively targeting the Quarterback, assuming things about his life and identity, using emotional language, etc. At the same time, make sure to make the same assumptions about the victim, but in the other way around: mention her "clean record", her impeccable character, the impact this will have on her life, etc.



Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- What feels wrong about the article? Does it seem balanced and accurate?
- Now imagine the article being written the other way around: all the Quarterback's actions being excused because of his upbringing etc, while the victim gets all the blame for the incident. This is how "himpathic" and victim-blaming articles are.
- Which is the latest news story you have come across that resembles the first article (aggressive towards the abuser), and which is the latest story that resembles the second one (victim-blaming)? Which is more probable to encounter?

Extra tool: Himpathic Language Bingo

How to use this tool: This bingo is not just a game; it is a practical self-audit tool for journalists and editorial teams. Print it out and keep it on your desk, or use it during editorial meetings.
When reviewing a draft article before publication, or when analyzing mainstream media coverage of a gender-based violence case, mark off any of these phrases you spot. If you get a "Bingo" (or even just one or two hits), the article is likely suffering from "himpathy" or victim-blaming and requires immediate structural rewriting.



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He has a bright future.	He comes from a good family.	He is an asset to this community /team.	We've all made mistakes in our youth.	He's just being a guy / boys will be boys.
She was leading him on.	What was she wearing though?	She knew what she was getting into.	Why was she in that situation ?	She provoked him.
He didn't know what he was doing.	He just lost control in the moment.	He was going through a really tough time.	He didn't mean any harm by it.	We shouldn't jump to conclusions .

Checklist time!

Before publishing an article on gender-based violence, ask yourself these direct questions to ensure your reporting is empathetic to the victim and avoids false balance toward the perpetrator. If you answer "No" to any of these, your article needs revising.

- Perpetrator's Framing (Avoiding Himpathy)
  - [ ] Did I avoid highlighting the perpetrator's past accomplishments, "bright future", or reputation?
  - [ ] Have I ensured that the article does not express undue sympathy for the negative consequences the crime will have on the abuser's life or career?
  - [ ] Did I avoid justifying the violence through the abuser's emotional state (e.g., "crime of passion," "blinded by jealousy," "lost control")?
- Survivor's Dignity (Avoiding Victim-Blaming)
  - [ ] Is the focus of the story on the impact of the harm suffered, rather than analyzing or questioning the survivor's actions or choices?
  - [ ] Have I removed any language that subtly implies doubt about the survivor's account (e.g., avoiding framing like "she claims" or "she admits")?
  - [ ] Did I avoid including irrelevant details about the victim's lifestyle, clothing, or past relationships?
- Systemic Context
  - [ ] Is the incident framed accurately as gender-based violence, rather than a generic "family dispute" or an "isolated tragedy"?

Resources

- Holinger P. (2026), Introspection Begets Empathy. Psychology Today, available at https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/great-kids-great-parents/202603/introspection-begets-empathy
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