

Worksheet 2.8: Building empathy for the sufferer – popping the balloon

How would you feel physically and emotionally if you were holding a balloon with your eyes shut and somebody was walking around you with a pin just for a few minutes?

How would it be for you if you felt like that for 10–15 minutes (the typical length of a panic attack)?
What about if you felt like that all day?

Remember we learnt in Exercise 2.5 that eating disorder sufferers can feel terrible if they are being constantly bombarded by people telling them to stop doing the things that represent their current coping strategies (this might be restrictive eating or overeating, over-exercise, obsessions and compulsions, self-harm behaviours, etc.). No wonder people with eating disorders appear to be very anxious much of the time.

This exercise explains the emotional and physical reaction that Edi might be experiencing much of the time when carers focus all their attention on trying to fix their loved one's illness (to pop the red balloon). Perhaps it can help you to empathise with the illness and realise that it is not just about food and the need to consider the deeper meaning and consequences of the illness when you want to have a conversation and use deep listening skills with your loved one.

Watch this short video that compares empathy with sympathy:
YouTube: Search 'Brené Brown on Empathy'.