Catch Word #213 – Do you know the difference between sympathy and empathy?

Episode description

Sympathy and empathy: these are two words that even native English speakers have difficulty with! In this Catch Word episode, Andrew and Suzanne help you understand these two similar but different words. We hope you'll learn a lot!

Fun fact

Sympathy comes from two old Greek words meaning "with" and "feeling." Even though that was thousands of years ago, the meaning in English still holds up.

Expressions included in the study guide

➢ Sympathy

➢ Empathy

➢ To acknowledge

➢ To dump [someone]

➢ A tough time

➢ A support network

Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript.

Andrew: Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hello, Suzanne.

Suzanne: Hey, Andrew, how are you?

Andrew: I'm doing fantastic. How are you doing?

Suzanne: I'm doing great. I just finished watching a little how to care for houseplants. I'm really into houseplants.

Andrew: Oh, my gosh, Suzanne so am I.

Suzanne: Really?

Andrew: Yeah, I have maybe 10 to 15 houseplants.

Suzanne: Wow.

Andrew: On my windowsill at the moment.

Suzanne: Oh, my gosh, we might have to do an episode about houseplants.

Andrew: We might have to do an episode about houseplants. I've always loved gardening.

Suzanne: Me too.

Andrew: But it's hard to have a garden in Seoul, there's not too much land available to grow plants and vegetables on. So I have an indoor houseplant garden instead.

Suzanne: Yeah, me too. As you know, with Montreal, the temperatures are unpredictable. So it's easier to cultivate things indoors.

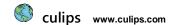|	
Andrew:	Well, listeners, stay tuned for a future Culips episode where we talk all about our houseplants and growing plants inside. That's cool, Suzanne, I didn't know that we had that in common.
Suzanne:	Yeah, that's really cool.
Andrew:	Today's episode is a Catch Word episode. And Catch Word is our series where we take a close look at interesting English vocabulary. So it could be an idiom or could be a phrasal verb, but it's always something that will be really helpful for your English speaking. We teach you only natural English expressions.
	And today's topic is a great suggestion that we received from a Culips listener. And she wanted to know what the difference is between two similar English words, **sympathy** and **empathy**. **Sympathy** and **empathy**. So that's what we will teach you today, the difference between these two commonly confused words, **sympathy** and **empathy**.
Suzanne:	That's a great question.
Andrew:	And a difficult one, even for native speakers, I think.
Suzanne:	I just want to take a moment to remind everybody that they can get the most out of this episode by listening along with our study guide. And our study guide contains the transcript of this episode, along with a bunch of awesome other activities that we designed to help you get better at English. So it's available on our website, you can download it. Go to Culips.com and check out the study guide.
Andrew:	Yeah, check it out.
	So, Suzanne, I think we should start by taking a look at the expression **sympathy**, **sympathy**.
Suzanne:	Yes.
Andrew:	**Sympathy**. So what does **sympathy** mean, Suzanne?
Suzanne:	Well, **sympathy** is when you have the feeling, a feeling inside of being sorry for someone, that you're showing that you understand and that you're connecting to that person's problems.

Andrew: Exactly, so we always use **sympathy** to talk about somebody else's problem, right? So somebody else has a problem and, if you can understand a little bit that that person's problem is real and painful for them, then you are showing **sympathy**, right? You can see, aw, that person is going through a difficult time, and you care for that person, so you have an emotional reaction. You're like, that sucks that you have this problem, I wish you didn't have this problem. That's **sympathy**.

Suzanne: It's an acknowledgment, right?

Andrew: Exactly, that's a great word, **acknowledging** somebody else's pain.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: **Sympathy** is a noun, right? **Sympathy**. But I think we use this word more frequently in the verb form, to sympathize. So I can sympathize with you, or you can sympathize with me.

Suzanne: Yeah, it really is an action, right? An action that you sympathize with someone. And it is something that you share with someone. An action that you share between each other, and so you do talk about it in that verb form, or in that adjective form where we are talking about someone who is sympathetic or an action that's sympathetic.

Andrew: Right. So if you are showing **sympathy** to someone, then you are sympathetic. And, Suzanne, we were talking a little bit before we recorded that if you are a speaker of a Romance language, you'll probably have to be careful with this word, right? As far as I know, this word in French means nice, right? You're a nice person if you're sympathetic.

Suzanne: Same with Italian, right? Simpatico.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: Yeah, it's the same.

Andrew: Right, so it actually doesn't mean a nice person. If you're a sympathetic person, it means that you are emotionally **acknowledging** somebody else's suffering or somebody else's pain.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Yeah, so be careful, everyone.

Suzanne: So now we are going to listen to our first example using **sympathy**.

Andrew: Sounds good, let's take a listen.

Coworker 1:	Where's Linda these days? I haven't seen her around for a little while.
Coworker 2:	She got fired.
Coworker 1:	Really? Well, you know what? I can't say that I'm surprised.
Coworker 2:	Yeah, neither can I. And to be honest with you, I have no **sympathy** for her. She was always late for work and, when she was here, she never worked very hard.

Suzanne:	Poor Linda.
Andrew:	Poor Linda. In the example we just heard, two coworkers discuss their ex-colleague, Linda. And Linda was fired because she was a terrible employee who was always late to work and never worked hard. The two coworkers mention that they have no **sympathy** for Linda because she was lazy, and so they don't feel sorry for her or pity for her, right? Perhaps if Linda was a dependable, hard-working employee, they would have felt more sympathetic, but, yeah, they didn't. And I guess this is a good example of the opposite of **sympathy**, right?
Suzanne:	Yeah, right, like not being sympathetic at all. Not feeling bad for her misfortune.
Andrew:	Exactly. So sometimes the negative example can be illuminating as to what the core meaning of the word is, as well.
Suzanne:	Yeah.
Andrew:	Cool. Let's listen to one more example using **sympathy**.

Friend 1:	I've got to get going home.
Friend 2:	What, really? It's only 7:30.
Friend 1:	Yeah, but I've got to get up early tomorrow.
Friend 2:	Oh, OK. What time do you have to wake up?
Friend 1:	9 a.m.
Friend 2:	9 a.m.? That's not very early at all.
Friend 1:	Hey, show me a little **sympathy**, OK? I'm not a morning person.

Suzanne: In this example, a woman is heading home from a party early in the evening because she has to work the next morning. And when her friend asks what time she starts, she says 9 a.m. Her friend then proceeds to make fun of her because, well, you know, it's not that early.

Andrew: 9 a.m. is not too early.

Suzanne: No. And so she asks for some **sympathy** from her friend because she isn't a morning person. In other words, she wants her friend to be a little more understanding that this is difficult for her, to wake up in the morning that early.

Andrew: This is a really common expression that you can use with your friends when they're kind of giving you a hard time, right? "Hey, show me a little **sympathy**, my life's tough."

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Right? If somebody's teasing you about something that's tough in your life, you could say that.

Suzanne: Yeah, for sure. You can nudge them along. Show some **sympathy**, OK?

Andrew: Yeah. Show me some **sympathy**, come on.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: OK, well, I think we can look at the second expression for today, which is a stronger emotion. It is **empathy**. OK? **Empathy**. E-M-P-A-T-H-Y. **Empathy**. Sue, could you let us know, what does it mean, **empathy**?

Suzanne: Yeah. So this is a deeper feeling. This is when you have a very deep understanding or feeling of someone's problems or what they're going through, whether they're, you know, deep problems or little problems. But it's the ability to completely understand, so it's maybe something that you've experienced before, too, as the person who has **empathy**. It's the ability to completely go there, put yourself in someone else's shoes because you have maybe experienced something very similar. Whereas with **sympathy** you can't really completely understand, maybe you haven't gone through those problems, but you can **acknowledge** that this is a difficult thing, whereas **empathy**, you're having a deeper understanding of that, of that pain.

Andrew: Right. So, for example, if I had a friend that was going through a breakup and his heart was broken because his girlfriend **dumped him**, OK? I could empathize with this, because I've also gone through breakups in my life with girlfriends, right? So I know that this can be difficult and I know what it feels like. I can understand that pain.

            But if my friend recently lost a parent, OK? One of his parents passed away, for example, both of my parents are still alive and I don't know what this pain is like, to lose a parent. So I can sympathize with my friend when his parent has passed away, but I can't empathize because I've never experienced that in my own life. So I can imagine, oh, yeah, that must be really difficult. But I don't know what that pain is like, so I can't feel **empathy** in that situation.

Suzanne: Now, I have a question, Andrew. What if, say, maybe your friend lost a parent and, like, you said you don't know that feeling. But maybe you've lost a close friend or maybe you've lost someone like a grandparent who felt like a parent, or something like that? Like maybe the circumstances aren't exactly the same, could you say to the person, "I feel like I could empathize with you, I can empathize with your situation because I had this loss happen that was a very profound loss for me." What do you think about that?

Andrew: Yeah, I think this is a case-by-case situation. And, to be honest with you, because **empathy** is a deeper feeling, I think we don't use this word as actively as we do sympathize. So I think it would be a little strange for, you know, Sue, if you were going through a difficult time, for me to say I empathize with you. That would sound like an unnatural sentence.

Suzanne: Right.

Andrew: It's more of something that we talk about, a feeling that we talk about, but it's not something that we use actively to say like, oh, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm hungry, I'm empathetic, I empathize. We don't really use it as actively like that in English. So I don't think this is an expression that you would say to somebody when they're going through pain. You could show **empathy** to that person, through your actions and not through your words.

Suzanne: Yes, it sounds almost weird for you to say, "I empathize with you."

Andrew: Right.

Suzanne: But you might say, like, for example, you were going through a **tough time** and I do something in my actions to show that I understand, like, maybe writing you a letter or something like that. You might come back and say, "Thank you so much for all the **empathy** you showed me, that really meant a lot to me."

Andrew: That's completely natural to use it like that, and even when we're talking about feelings, right? And describing people, too, we can use this word. You see this word a lot in self-help books, books about psychology. Or even on the news sometimes, you'll see a criminal, right? We can say, "Oh, why doesn't he have any **empathy**?" Maybe a mass shooter or something, we shake our heads and say, "Well, this guy has no **empathy** at all." Which is kind of the definition of psychopathy, right, is the absence of **sympathy** and **empathy**. So, yeah, we use the word more in these contexts and not when we're just chatting one-on-one to show our emotion. We show this emotion with actions rather than words.

Suzanne: Yeah, and I'm glad we took time to explain that. I know that usually we don't explain words and phrases as much, but this is a very emotional word. And it usually takes place in difficult situations, so you do wanna have some respect and not be clumsy or say the wrong thing. So it's in this kind of situation.

Andrew: That's great. So why don't we give our listeners some examples now using **empathy**? So here we go, guys, example number one.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Friend 1:   Hey, have you talked to Jason recently? I heard he's been feeling pretty down in the dumps these days.

Friend 2:   Yeah, I have, and I have a lot of **empathy** for him. I've also gone through bouts of depression, and it's a really difficult thing to deal with.

Friend 1:   Well, I'm glad he's got a good **support network** and friends like you around him.

Andrew: In this example, a guy says that he has a lot **empathy** for his depressed friend, Jason. And he can say this, because he was also depressed once and clearly and deeply feels that struggle that Jason is going through with his battle with depression. So this is exactly the definition of **empathy**, right, Sue? You can totally understand someone else's situation because you've been there yourself.

Suzanne: Yeah, absolutely. And in that example, it really showed that that was a good friend, that someone who can really understand deeply.

Andrew: For sure.

           OK, let's listen to the final example for today's episode.

Student 1:	I think I'm going to fail my history class.
Student 2:	Really? How's that even possible?
Student 1:	I forgot to hand in a few of my assignments.
Student 2:	A few? I have no **empathy** for you. Why do you even go to university if you don't wanna do any of the work?

Suzanne: In this example, two college students are talking about their history class. And one student mentions that he thinks he's going to fail the class. And so his classmate makes fun of him and mentions that she can't understand how that is possible and has no **empathy** for him. Since the classmate has never failed a class, she doesn't understand what that experience is really like. So, yeah, she couldn't empathize.

Andrew: That's another way that we can use this expression, right? Kind of jokingly, when we're teasing our friends, "Oh, I have no **empathy** for you."

Suzanne: Yeah, I hear that a lot, people joke about that a lot.

Andrew: Right, especially when somebody's complaining about a situation that's not really that big of a deal, right? Like, "Oh, I had to work 1 hour of overtime tonight and missed my favourite TV show." Well, I have no **empathy** for you, come on. It's all right.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: It's, like, not that big of a problem.

Sue, let's just wrap up today by recapping what we learned. So we looked at the difference between two closely related expressions, **sympathy** and **empathy**. And I think the takeaway is this: **sympathy** is the feeling of being sorry for someone, while **empathy** is a deeper understanding of someone's emotional pain or problem because you've had a very similar experience yourself and you know what it feels like.

Suzanne: That sounds perfectly explained.

Andrew: Well, thank you for listening, everyone. If you have any comments or questions or suggestions for futures episodes, please drop us a line. You can send us a message via our Facebook page, which is Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast, or email us directly. Our email address is contact, C-O-N-T-A-C-T@Culips, C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Suzanne: Don't forget to follow us on social media, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube. We're everywhere, just search for the Culips English Podcast and you'll find us.

Andrew: Right on. OK, guys, we'll be back soon with another amazing Culips English lesson, and we'll talk to you then. Bye.

Suzanne: Bye.

Detailed Explanations

Sympathy
Noun

Sympathy is the emotion of feeling pity for someone. If you hear someone is having a difficult time, you might have **sympathy** for their situation. It is different from **empathy** because you might not know the exact feelings the other person is having. The related verb is to sympathize, and the related adjective is sympathetic.

Here are a couple more examples with **sympathy**:

Lisa:	Do you follow the news at all?
Meng:	I catch things here and there.
Lisa:	Oh. I've been following what's happening to the many Syrian refugees around the world. It's pretty scary stuff.
Meng:	Oh, yes. I've read up on that. I feel so much **sympathy** for them. I can't imagine what it's like to go through that.

Teagan:	I'm thinking of asking the boss for the day off on Wednesday.
Reed:	What's going on Wednesday?
Teagan:	My son just got out of the hospital, and it's his birthday on that day. He's been asking for years to have his birthday party at an amusement park. Do you think I could get the day off?
Reed:	I don't know. The boss is kind of heartless. In my experience, he doesn't have **sympathy** for things like that. But you can try asking.

Empathy
Noun

Empathy is the ability to understand someone else's feelings. It is like putting yourself in someone else's shoes. Unlike sympathy, you can feel **empathy** for somebody's happiness. The related verb is to empathize, and the related adjective is empathetic.

Here are a couple more examples with **empathy**:

Ernest:	I watched such an amazing movie yesterday.
Mingyu:	Really? Why did you like it so much?
Ernest:	It was quite touching. The main character was abandoned as a child and raised by his grandparents.
Mingyu:	Oh, that's similar to your situation, right? Weren't you raised by your aunt and uncle?
Ernest:	That's right. So I had so much **empathy** for the main character and what he had to go through.

Jackson:	Do you give your students a lot of homework?
Renee:	No, not a lot.
Jackson:	That's surprising. Why not?
Renee:	When I was a student, I was so busy and I had so little time for homework. I know my students now have a lot of extracurricular activities. I feel genuine **empathy** for them.
Jackson:	I see.

To acknowledge
Verb

To acknowledge someone or something is to accept their existence. You are confirming that it exists. For example, you can **acknowledge** the existence of an email. You can **acknowledge** the existence of an ancestor in your family tree. You can also **acknowledge** the presence of someone by nodding or saying hello to them.

Here are a couple more examples with **to acknowledge**:

Russell:	Who's a better chess player between you and your brother?
Alfredo:	Me. For sure.
Russell:	Really? I heard he beat you five games to four last weekend.
Alfredo:	I refuse **to acknowledge** his wins.
Russell:	Why not?
Alfredo:	I think he was using a computer program to beat me. Those wins are tainted!

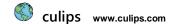|	
Muriel:	How have you been since your breakup with Jack?
Tatiana:	OK, I guess. It's been strange.
Muriel:	Strange? What do you mean?
Tatiana:	Well, we were both at the same party the other day. I saw him from a distance and waved. He saw me but didn't return the wave. In fact, he just walked away.
Muriel:	Wow, he didn't even **acknowledge** you? That's pretty rude.

To dump [someone]
Idiom, informal

To dump [someone] is to break up with them. This usually refers to a romantic relationship, if you break up with your boyfriend or girlfriend. **To dump** is to discard something, as in to throw away garbage. It sounds bad to say that about another person, but it is a common way to speak of a breakup. The verb can also be used in the passive form: you can say I got **dumped**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to dump [someone]**:

Preet:	I saw your boyfriend on the bus about 20 minutes ago. He looked really sad.
Helen:	That's probably because I just **dumped him**.
Preet:	Really? I thought things were going well.
Helen:	They were, until I saw text messages on his phone from other girls.
Preet:	Oh. Then good job.

Marissa:	Are you searching a dating website right now?
Tyler:	Yeah.
Marissa:	I thought you were going out with Sandra. What happened?
Tyler:	I got **dumped**, that's what happened. Next week is my brother's birthday party and I'd rather not go alone.

A tough time
Idiom

A tough time means a difficult period of time in someone's life. Although **a tough time** usually refer to a person's life, it can apply to other situations. You can say your marriage or your company is going through **a tough time**. Similar expressions are a rough patch, hard times, hardship, and being down in the dumps. You can also use this expression for a shorter period of time, as in you are having **a tough time** with your homework or cooking with a new recipe.

Here are a couple more examples with **a tough time**:

Mitsumi:	How are your Japanese language classes going?
Laurence:	Not good. I'm having such **a tough time** with the writing systems.
Mitsumi:	Oh, yeah. That can be difficult.
Laurence:	Do you think you could help me out?

Ella:	Do you think we can increase our company's market share overseas in the next year?
Namhee:	It's possible. But that will cost a lot of money.
Ella:	Do we have the funds?
Namhee:	In a way, we do. But the economy is going through **a tough time** these days. I think it would be wise to save that money just in case things get worse.

A support network
Idiom

A support network refers to the group of people who surround you and can help you when you need it. **A support network** can also be an organization, such as a church or a government agency. Another common expression is a support system.

Here are a couple more examples with **a support network**:

Chen:	How has your sister been doing since she lost her job?
Howard:	Fairly well, all things considered. It's definitely not a good thing that she lost her job.
Chen:	Does she have a good **support network**?
Howard:	I would say so. She has a lot of friends and family members helping out. I heard she's starting to get job offers, too, so that's good.

Sasha:	How long ago did you move to Canada?
Patrick:	Almost 2 years ago.
Sasha:	Wow, 2 years already. Is there anything you miss or you don't have compared to your home country?
Patrick:	Everything is pretty much the same, apart from one thing. I had a pretty good **support network** back home. I had family and friends. But now I'm building up a new **support network** here. It's coming along.

Quiz

1. Which word is associated with the expression to put yourself in someone else's shoes?

a) sympathy
b) empathy

2. What does having a support network mean?

a) you have good internet access
b) you have supportive friends
c) you have good legs
d) you have a really good friend

3. What is NOT a good example of acknowledging someone?

a) nodding in someone's direction
b) answering an email
c) refusing to answer the phone
d) calling out someone's name

4. What does to dump someone mean?

a) to throw someone in the garbage
b) to throw something in the garbage
c) to feel depressed
d) to end a relationship

5. Which of the following is NOT a synonym of a tough time?

a) an exciting time
b) a hard time
c) a difficult moment
d) a rough patch

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. **Who is someone you sympathize with?**

2. **Who is someone you empathize with?**

3. **Do you think sympathy or empathy is more important in life? Explain.**

4. **What kind of support network do you have? Are you happy with it?**

5. **What do you do when you are having a tough time?**

Quiz Answers

1.b   2.b   3.c   4.d   5.a

Episode credits	
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