Practicing Empathy and Compassion

When you have more capacity to extend empathy and compassion to others, two ways to cultivate these qualities are to practice mindfulness, which can increase your awareness of others, and to avoid placing blame, which disconnects you from the feelings of others.

For some practical steps in displaying empathy, Dr. Helen Riess, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, developed an acronym, EMPATHY:

E: Eye contact — usually the first indication someone has noticed us.
M: Muscles of facial expression — the look on a person’s face says a lot about their emotional state.
P: Posture — it powerfully conveys connection.
A: Affect (the scientific term for expressed emotions) — when you label someone’s emotion, it changes how you hear what the person is saying.
T: Tone of voice — a powerful conveyer of emotion.
H: Hearing the whole person — not only hearing words but also understanding the context of the other person’s life. Clarifying questions and statements are key to making others feel heard.
Y: Your response to the other person.