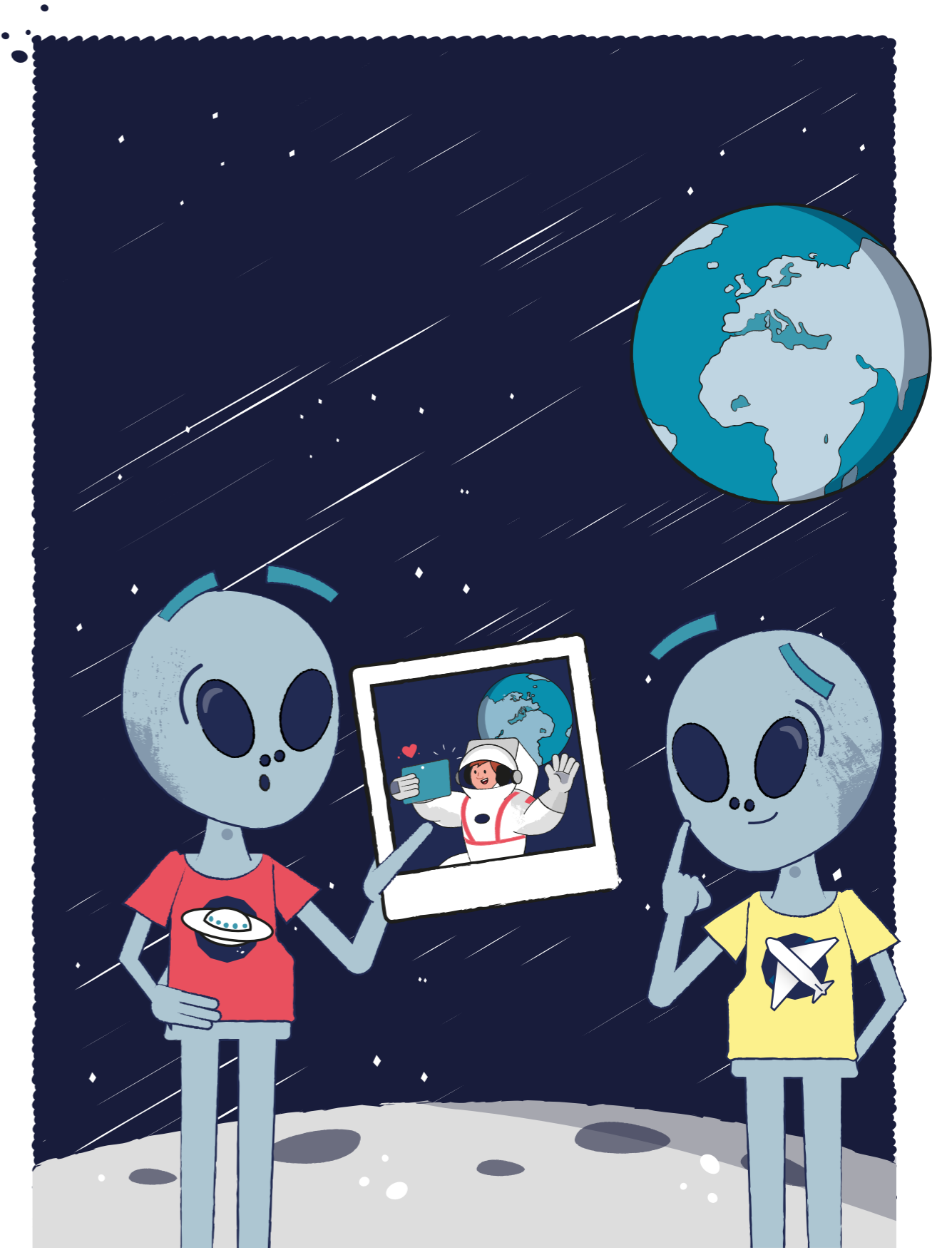


CHAPTER 2:  
**EMPATHY**





# EMPATHY



In the previous chapter we talked about what astronauts bring with them when they leave Earth. But another question would be:

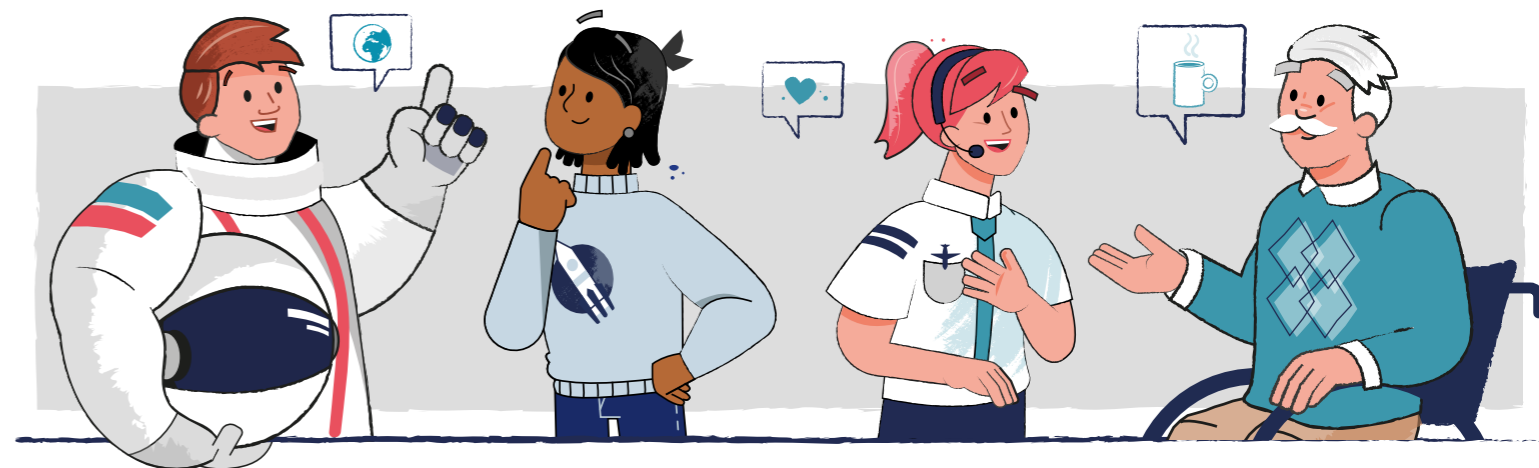
"WHAT WOULD THEY BRING BACK FROM SPACE WHEN THEY COME HOME?"



Well, astronauts are unanimous about this: they would bring back the view of the Earth from outer space. Seeing our planet from space seems to be one of the most transformative experiences ever: we call it the Overview effect. Our tiny, fragile ball of life, alone in the void, suddenly seems the most important thing to protect. And when they see it, the astronauts suddenly feel an overwhelming sense of empathy, of community with all other humans. Empathy?

...  
Wait, what does that even mean?

YOU MIGHT HAVE NOTICED IT ALREADY. WHEN A FRIEND IS OVER-EXCITED AND JOYFUL, YOU PROBABLY FEEL EXCITED AND JOYFUL TOO, EVEN BEFORE YOU FULLY UNDERSTAND WHAT'S GOING ON. WE HAVE THIS WONDERFUL CAPACITY TO UNDERSTAND AND EVEN FEEL WHAT OTHERS ARE FEELING. WE CAN BRIEFLY PLACE OURSELVES IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES AND SHARE THEIR EMOTIONS. THIS CAPACITY IS CALLED EMPATHY, AND IT IS SUPER HELPFUL TO BUILD MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS, TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE WORLD AND TO CREATE TRUE FRIENDSHIPS.



Of course, critical thinking and making judgements are equally important skills. However, in this chapter we will leave these skills to one side: we will do our best to listen, accept and understand other people's feelings.

AND YES, THAT MEANS ACCEPTING THAT SOMETIMES PEOPLE HAVING NEGATIVE FEELINGS ABOUT US.

This is uneasy and uncomfortable, but guess what? Negative feelings are part of relationships too. And if your friends feel able to tell you when they are disappointed in or angry with you, it will help to strengthen your friendships.

**Empathy can be used with anyone**, with a sibling, a parent, even a teacher. With someone from another city, or from another country. With someone who's had a history very different from your own. With someone who has values and beliefs that are the opposite of yours. To be empathetic does not mean you agree with them. It does mean you're doing your best to understand them. And you will see the world in a new light: not just from your point of view, but also from a completely different perspective.

Life is more enjoyable with multiple perspectives, isn't it?

DURING THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES, YOU'LL HAVE OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING AND EMPATHY. IF WE ALL PRACTISED THOSE SKILLS, MAYBE WE WOULD UNDERSTAND AND SUPPORT EACH OTHER A BIT MORE. MAYBE SOME OF THE CONFLICTS AROUND US WOULD DISAPPEAR. MAYBE WE WOULD BE ABLE TO FEEL LIKE ALL HUMANS ARE FELLOW PASSENGERS ON THIS COMMON VESSEL CALLED EARTH... OR MAYBE NOT, MAYBE IT'S ALL JUST AN UNREALISTIC UTOPIA?

WELL, LET'S TRY AND FIND OUT, SHALL WE?





# ACTIVE LISTENING

HOW GOOD ARE YOU AT LISTENING? I MEAN REALLY LISTENING, NOT PRETENDING TO LISTEN, NOT THINKING ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE, SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING CLEVER TO SAY OR PATIENTLY WAITING FOR THE CONVERSATION TO END. DO YOU UNDERSTAND NOT ONLY WHAT ANOTHER PERSON IS TELLING YOU, BUT ALSO THE DETAILS WHICH ARE SUGGESTED, AND EVEN THE EMOTIONS THE OTHER PERSON FEELS?



Listen to someone today. Go to a parent, sibling or friend, and kindly ask: "How are you feeling?", or "How was your day?". As soon as the conversation starts, listen as actively as you can:

Focus on the other person: what are they telling you? What emotions do they feel? Give them time to speak, breathe, to wander. Don't be afraid of silence.

Show the other person that you are sharing their emotions: "You seem really angry about that", "You're sad about this...", "this is wonderful, you must be so proud!", "and how do you feel about it?"

To support the other person in speaking, you may use gentle, encouraging questions, like "Really?", "OK, so she told you this?", "Wow, so that happened...?"

Resist the urge to interrupt, to give your opinion, to say what immediately comes to mind, and even to give advice.



WHEN YOU'VE DONE THIS A COUPLE OF TIMES, YOU MAY TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL! CAN YOU DO THIS ACTIVITY WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS DIFFERENT OPINIONS THAN YOU? WITH SOMEONE WHO IS ANGRY AT YOU? WITH SOMEONE YOU'RE ANGRY WITH? AND IF YOU FAIL FROM TIME TO TIME — INTERRUPTING, BEING JUDGEMENTAL OR NOT LISTENING ANYMORE, IT'S OK. THE FACT THAT YOU TRIED IT, MEANS YOU ARE PROGRESSING. AS SAMUEL BECKETT WROTE: "NO MATTER. TRY AGAIN. FAIL AGAIN. FAIL BETTER".

# WHAT IF THAT HAD BEEN ME?

THINK ABOUT THE LAST TIME SOMEONE SHARED AN EMOTION WITH YOU (EXCITEMENT, JOY, ANGER, LONELINESS...). ASK YOURSELF: "WHAT IF THAT HAD BEEN ME? HOW WOULD I FEEL?" AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, "WHAT WOULD HELP ME IN THIS SITUATION? WHAT WOULD I NEED FROM MY FRIENDS? WHAT WOULD BE REALLY SUPPORTIVE?"



HOW DO I FEEL ABOUT THIS?

Loneliness **JOY**  
**EXCITEMENT** ANGER

OTHER: \_\_\_\_\_



HOW WOULD I FEEL?



WHAT IF THAT HAD BEEN ME?

## Story:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



WHAT WOULD BE SUPPORTIVE?



WRITE THE ANSWERS IN YOUR DIARY. IT IS PROBABLE THAT WHAT WOULD HAVE HELPED YOU IS VERY, VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE REACTION YOU ACTUALLY HAD. IT'S OK: ONCE AGAIN, THE MOST DIFFICULT PART IS TO REALISE THIS, AND TAKE IT INTO ACCOUNT FOR NEXT TIME.

ACTIVITY

3



# FICTIONAL CHARACTER

NOW, LET'S TRY TO HAVE EMPATHY FOR SOMEONE VERY DIFFERENT FROM YOU.

CHOOSE A FICTIONAL CHARACTER FROM A NOVEL, A MOVIE OR A SERIES. BUT DON'T CHOOSE THE HERO, DON'T CHOOSE SOMEONE YOU EASILY IDENTIFY WITH: TAKE A CHARACTER THAT SEEMS FAR AWAY FROM YOU. IT CAN BE A SECONDARY CHARACTER, OR EVEN THE VILLAIN, SOMEONE YOU DON'T REALLY LIKE, SOMEONE YOU DISAGREE WITH.

NOW, IMAGINE AND WRITE IN YOUR DIARY: WHAT IS THAT CHARACTER FEELING AND THINKING? HOW DOES THE CHARACTER PERCEIVE THE SITUATION? WHAT IS THE CHARACTER EXPERIENCING? WHAT WOULD THE NOVEL, MOVIE OR SERIES BECOME IF IT WAS MADE FROM THAT CHARACTER'S POINT OF VIEW?

CHARACTER:

WHAT IS THE CHARACTER FEELING?

WHAT IS THE CHARACTER EXPERIENCING?

HOW WOULD THE NEW NOVEL, MOVIE OR SERIES BE CALLED?

