

Empathy

Over the years, a great deal of research concerning helpers' efficiency has been conducted, and has led to a startling conclusion. Rather than better methods, what seems to actually foster success is the helpers' ability to establish a good working relationship with the people they serve. Studies have repeatedly shown empathy to be a major ingredient of success and this has remained true no matter which method, diagnosis, problem, or stage of change was being addressed. It has come to be the holy grail in the quest for helpers' efficiency and effectiveness.

Even though it is now understood to be an indisputable part of therapeutic efficiency, we have never been taught empathy. Throughout all of my studies as an individual social worker and therapist I have found only limited material for getting a better understanding of what empathy is, how we recognize it, how we experience it, how we express it, and, most importantly, how we teach and coach empathy.

Searching for ways to answer these questions and turning those answers into simple pragmatic ways of training and coaching, we have found that empathy can not be thought of like any other social skills.

Defining empathy

What is empathy? If we address the question to a large group of practitioners, an array of popular definitions will include: feeling what the person feels, suffering as one with the person, identifying with the person, being able to understand the person, knowing exactly how the person feels, being able to put oneself in the person's shoes. Although these definitions may seem similar, some do not apply to empathy at all and others don't quite capture the full essence. This will become clear as we move into what empathy is and how to make it work for the people we serve.

Carl Rogers defined empathy in the following way, "The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person." It means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as they sense it and to perceive the causes thereof as they perceive them. Rodgers did not limit empathy to the understanding of the person's emotions; he widened it to the scope of the frame of reference, thoughts, values, and judgments underlining those emotions

The Three Facets of Empathy

Described in this fashion, empathy can be seen as a particular interpersonal skill. In order to coach empathy, we have tried to develop a pragmatic functional definition. There seems to be three closely interwoven parts or facets to empathy: the capacity to experience it (the felt sense), the capacity to convey how that experience feels to the person, and the capacity to watch how the response lands on another.

The first facet of empathy would necessarily be the ability to create a climate allowing the person we serve an opportunity for self-disclosure and the spontaneous expression of their personal values, thoughts, and emotions (*to reveal, not conceal*). Much of this would probably be intuitive, a “felt sense”¹ from a knowledge of the person's sensitivity and of the situation that they're going through. We would have to perceive and identify verbal as well as paraverbal and nonverbal signals, allowing us to recognize the emotions most likely being experienced by the person. For instance the person claiming that everything is fine with a shaky voice and a nervous stance.

The ability to imagine oneself in another's emotions and thoughts plays a key role in the empathetic understanding of another's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions. How would you be able to help the person if they were experiencing hopelessness, helplessness, and despair and you went all the way there too? In order to convey hope it would seem necessary for you to have a different point of view based on your experience. In order to experience empathetic understanding while imagining yourself in someone else's place, it would have to be “just as if” you were there, while still harboring a different and helpful point of view.

Experiencing another's “felt sense” alone without conveying it is unlikely to be helpful to the person we serve. This leads to the second facet of empathy, empathetic understanding has to be shared in order to be effective. This can be done by the direct expression of one's understanding or by reflecting thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental fashion. Cultural adaptations of the way we express and reflect are probably necessary to be mindful that certain expressions may elicit energy to push back and discord in some people. One example, the statement “We haven't counted as people.” to which the helper responds, “I can imagine just how bad you must have felt.” That would often draw a response from the person such as, “No, no you can't imagine.” Paraphrasing seems a good way to convey understanding without referring to oneself, “You must have felt pretty bad about that.” There is also converting a gentle guess to a reach for what you imagine of the values and the core needs.

The third important facet is watching how it lands on the individual we are serving. Even if it is a “felt sense” and even if we conveyed it well, the real truth is watching how it lands on another.

¹ A “felt sense” by the helper is a combination of awareness, emotion, intuitiveness, and embodiment gained through practice. A knowing.