

# BASIC EMPATHY

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The advantage of attending and listening is twofold. First, since attending and listening are ways of translating or implementing the value of respect, they contribute to relationship building. Second, they lay the foundation for the helper's responses to the client. Basic empathy and probing are response skills.

- Basic empathy involves *listening* to clients, *understanding* them and their concerns to the degree that this is possible, and *communicating* this understanding to them so that they might *understand themselves* more fully and *act* on their understanding.
- Probing involves *statements* and *questions* on the part of the helper that enable clients to *explore more fully* any relevant issue at any stage or step of the helping process.

Responding skills such as empathy and probing have three dimensions or requirements as described in the following section.

### THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF RESPONDING SKILLS: PERCEPTIVENESS, KNOW-HOW, AND ASSERTIVENESS

The communication skills involved in responding to clients have three dimensions: perceptiveness, know-how, and assertiveness. These three dimensions are discussed in this chapter as they apply to basic empathy and in Chapters 9 and 10 as they apply to challenging skills.

**Perceptiveness.** Your responding skills are only as good as the accuracy of the perceptions on which they are based. Consider the difference between these two examples.

Mario, a manager, is counseling Enrique, a relatively new member of his team. During the past week, Enrique has made a significant contribution to a major project, but he has also made one rather costly mistake. Enrique's mind is on his blunder, not his success. Mario, sensing Enrique's discomfort, says, "Your ideas in the meeting last Monday helped us reconceptualize and reset the entire project. It was a great contribution. That kind of 'out of the box' thinking is very valuable here. Your conversation with Acme's purchasing agent on Wednesday made him quite angry. Something tells me that you might be more worried about Wednesday's mistake than delighted with Monday's contribution. I just wanted to let you know that I'm not." Enrique is greatly relieved. They go on to have a useful dialogue about what made Monday so good and what could be learned from Wednesday's blunder.

Mario's perceptiveness and his ability to defuse a tense situation lay the foundation for an excellent dialogue. Note the contrast in the next example.

Beth is counseling Frank in a community mental-health center. Frank is scared to talk about an "ethical blunder" that he made at work. Beth senses his discomfort but thinks that he is angry rather than scared. She says, "Frank, I'm wondering what's making you so angry right now." Since Frank does not feel angry, he says nothing. He's startled by what she says and feels even more insecure. Beth takes his silence as a confirmation of his "anger." She tries to get him to talk about it.

Beth's perception is wrong and disrupts the helping process. She misreads Frank's emotional state and tries to set a course based on her flawed perception.

The kind of perceptiveness needed to be a good helper comes from basic intelligence, social intelligence, effective attending, and careful listening. It does not come automatically with experience.

**Know-how.** Once you are aware of what kind of response is called for, you need to be able to deliver it. For instance, if you are aware that a client is anxious and confused because this is his first visit to a helper, it does little good if your understanding remains locked up inside you. Let's return to Frank and Beth for a moment.

Frank and Beth end up arguing about his "anger." Frank finally gets up and leaves. Beth, of course, takes this as a sign that she was right in the first place. The next day Frank goes to see his minister. The minister sees quite clearly that Frank is scared and confused. His perceptions are right. He says something like this: "Frank, you seem to be very uncomfortable. It may be that whatever is on your mind might be difficult to talk about. But I'd be glad to listen to it, whatever it is. But I don't want to push you into anything." "But it's terrible," Frank blurts out. "I know it's terrible for you, Frank, but my guess is that it's also terribly human." Frank hesitates a bit, then leans back into his chair, takes a deep breath, and launches into his story.

The minister not only is perceptive but also knows how to address Frank's anxiety and hesitation. The minister says to himself in his shadow conversation, "Here's a man who is almost exploding with the need to tell his story, but fear or shame or something like that is paralyzing him. How can I put him at ease, let him know that he won't get hurt here? I need to recognize his anxiety and gently offer an opening."

**Assertiveness.** Accurate perceptions and excellent know-how are meaningless unless they are actually used when called for. If you see that self-doubt is a theme that weaves itself throughout a client's story and search for a better future and if you know how to challenge him to explore this tendency but fail to do so, you do not pass the assertiveness test. Your skills remain locked up inside you. Consider this example.

Nina, a young counselor in the Center for Student Development, is in the middle of the first session with Antonio, a graduate student. During the ses-

sion, he mentions briefly a very helpful session he had had the previous year with Carl, a middle-aged counselor on the staff. But Carl has accepted an academic position at the university and is no longer involved with the Center. Nina realizes that he is disappointed that he couldn't see Carl and probably has some misgivings about being helped by a relatively new, younger woman. She has faced sensitive issues like this before and would not take it amiss if Antonio were to choose a different counselor. During a lull in the conversation, she says something like this: "Antonio, could we take a 'time-out' here for a moment? I think you were disappointed to find out that Carl was no longer here. Or at least I would be if I were in your shoes. You were just more or less 'assigned' to me and I'm not sure the fit is right. Maybe you can give that a bit of thought. Then, if you think I can be of help, you can schedule another meeting with me. But you're certainly free to review who is on staff and choose whomever you want."

In this case, perceptiveness, know-how, and assertiveness all come together. This is not to suggest that assertiveness is an overriding value in and of itself. To be assertive without perceptiveness and know-how is to court disaster.

## BASIC EMPATHY: COMMUNICATING UNDERSTANDING TO CLIENTS

If attending and listening are the skills that enable helpers to get in touch with the world of the client, then basic empathy is the skill that enables them to communicate their understanding of that world. The term *basic empathy* is used to distinguish it from empathic listening, discussed in Chapter 4, and from another form of empathy, "advanced" empathy, to be discussed in Chapter 10. A secure starting point in helping others is listening to them carefully, struggling to understand their concerns, and sharing that understanding with them. When clients are asked what they find helpful in counseling interviews, being understood gets top ratings.

The confusion surrounding empathy was mentioned in Chapter 4. Some writers wax lyrical about empathy and its place in human commerce: "Empathy, the accepting, confirming, and understanding human echo evoked by the self, is a psychological nutrient without which human life, as we know and cherish it, could not be sustained" (Kohut, 1978, p. 705). Empathy, then, becomes a value, a philosophy, a cause with almost religious overtones. Covey (1989), naming empathic communication one of the "seven habits of highly effective people," said that empathy provides "psychological air"; that is, it helps people breathe more freely in their relationships. Care must be taken, however, not to make a cult out of empathy. It's certainly not a miracle pill. I have a great deal of sympathy with the views expressed by Rogers (see Chapter 4), Kohut, and Covey. Although many people may "feel" empathy for others, the truth is that few know how to put it into words. Empathy as a communication of understanding of the other remains an improbable event in everyday life. Perhaps that's why it is so

powerful in helping settings. There is such an unfulfilled need to be understood. The sections that follow ignore the confusion and mysticism surrounding the concept of empathy and continue what was started in the previous chapter—that is, to deal with it as a fully human *communication skill* that is very helpful in promoting both the values and the goals of the helping process.

## THE KEY ELEMENTS OF BASIC EMPATHY

This section is a kind of anatomy lesson. That is, we are going to take basic empathy apart and look at the pieces. Further on, we'll put them back together again.

### The Basic-Empathy Formula

Basic empathic understanding can be expressed in the following stylized formula:

You *feel* . . . [here name the correct emotion expressed by the client] . . .  
*because* (or *when*) . . . [here indicate the correct experiences and behaviors that give rise to the feelings]. . . .

The formula is a beginner's tool to get used to the concept of empathy. The formula is used in the following examples. For the moment, ignore how stylized it sounds. Ordinary human language will be substituted later. In the first example, a divorced mother with two young kids is talking to a social worker about her ex-husband.

**CLIENT:** I could kill him! He failed to take the kids again last weekend. This is three times out of the last six weeks.

**HELPER:** You feel furious because he keeps failing to hold up his part of the bargain.

His not taking the kids according to their agreement [an experience for the client] infuriates her [an emotion].

In the following example, a woman who is going to have a hysterectomy is talking with a hospital counselor the night before surgery.

**PATIENT:** God knows what they'll find when they go in tomorrow. I keep asking questions, but they keep giving me vague answers.

**HELPER:** You feel troubled about what they're not telling you.

The accuracy of the helper's response does not solve the woman's problems, but the patient does move a bit. She shares her concerns and perhaps reduces her anxiety by talking about it.

## Experiences, Behaviors, and Feelings as Elements of Empathy

The key elements of an empathic response are the same as the key elements of the client's story—that is, the experiences, behaviors, and feelings that make up that story. This is the next part of our “anatomy” lesson.

**Respond to the client's feelings.** In the formula, “You feel . . .” is to be followed by the correct *family* of emotions and the correct *intensity*.

- The statements “You feel hurt,” “You feel relieved,” and “You feel enthusiastic” specify different families of emotion.
- The statements “You feel annoyed,” “You feel angry,” and “You're furious” specify different degrees of intensity in the same family (anger).

The words *sad*, *mad*, *bad*, and *glad* refer to four of the main families of emotion, whereas *sad*, *very sad*, and *extremely sad* refer to different intensities.

Note that the client may actually be talking about emotions felt in the past—that is, at the time of the event being discussed—or expressing feelings about the event that arise during the helping session, or both. For instance, consider this interchange between a client involved in a child custody proceeding and a counselor.

**CLIENT (calmly):** I get furious with him [affect] when he says things, little snide things, that suggest that I don't take good care of the kids [experience].

**HELPER:** You feel especially angry when he intimates that you're not a good mother.

The client isn't angry right now. Rather, she is talking about her anger. The following example—a woman is talking about one of her colleagues at work—deals with expressed rather than discussed feelings.

**CLIENT (enthusiastically):** I threw caution to the wind and confronted him about his sarcasm [action] and it actually worked. He not only apologized, but behaved himself the rest of the trip [experiences for the client].

**HELPER:** You feel great because you took a chance and it paid off.

It goes without saying that clients don't always name their feelings and emotions. However, if they express emotion, it is part of the message and needs to be identified and understood.

Often helpers have to read their clients' emotions—both the family and the intensity—in their nonverbal behavior. In the following example, a North American student comes to you, sits down, looks at the floor, hunches over, and haltingly says,

**CLIENT:** I don't even know where to start. (He falls silent).

**HELPER:** You're feeling pretty miserable, though I'm not sure why.

**CLIENT (after a pause):** Well, let me tell you why. . . .

You see that he is depressed [affect], and his nonverbal behavior indicates that the feelings are quite intense. His nonverbal behavior reveals the broad family ("You feel bad") and the intensity ("You feel very bad"). Of course, you do not yet know the experiences and behaviors that give rise to these emotions.

Naming and discussing feelings threatens some clients. In this case, it might be better to focus on experiences and behaviors and proceed only gradually to a discussion of feelings. The following client, an unmarried man in his mid-30s who has come to talk about "certain dissatisfactions" in his life, has shown some reluctance to express or even to talk about feelings.

**CLIENT** (in a pleasant, relaxed voice): My mother is always trying to make a little kid out of me. And I'm in my mid-30s! Last week, in front of a group of my friends, she brought out my rubber boots and an umbrella and gave me a little talk on how to dress for bad weather (laughs).

**COUNSELOR A:** It might be hard to admit it, but I get the feeling that down deep you were furious.

**CLIENT:** Well, I don't know about that. Anyway, at work. . . .

Counselor A pushes the emotion issue and is met with mild resistance. The client changes the topic.

**COUNSELOR B:** So she keeps playing the mother role—to the hilt, it would seem.

**CLIENT:** And the hilt includes not wanting me to grow up. But I am grown up . . . well, pretty grown up.

Counselor B, choosing to respond to the "strong mother" issue rather than the more sensitive "being kept a kid and feeling really lousy about it" issue, gives the client more room to move. This works, for the client himself moves toward the more sensitive issue. Some clients are hesitant to talk about certain emotions. One client might find it relatively easy to talk about his anger but not his hurt. For another client it might be just the opposite. Empathy includes the ability to pick up and deal with these differences.

Finally, keep in mind that in most cases, feelings and emotions arise from the client's experiences and behaviors. Emotions should not be overemphasized or underemphasized. They should be dealt with in an integrated way (see Anderson & Leitner, 1996). Of course, once experienced, emotions go on to drive other behaviors. As Lang (1995) pointed out, they are "action dispositions" (p. 372). They are an important part of the problem situation or the undeveloped opportunity, but they are only a part.

Since clients express feelings in a number of different ways, helpers can communicate an understanding of feelings in a variety of ways.

- **By single words.** You feel good. You're depressed. You feel abandoned. You're delighted. You feel trapped. You're angry.
- **By different kinds of phrases.** You're sitting on top of the world. You feel down in the dumps. You feel left in the lurch. Your back's up against the wall. You're really steaming.

- **By what is implied in behavioral statements.** (What action I feel like taking): You feel like giving up (implied emotion: despair). You feel like hugging him (implied emotion: joy). Now that it's over, you feel like throwing up (implied emotion: disgust).

- **By what is implied in experiences that are revealed.** You feel you're being dumped on (implied feeling: victimized). You feel you're being stereotyped (implied feeling: resentment). You feel you're at the top of her list (implied feeling: elation). You feel you're going to get caught (implied feeling: apprehension). Note that the implication of each could be spelled out: You feel angry because you're being dumped on. You resent the fact that you're being stereotyped. You feel great because it seems that you're at the top of her list.

Since ultimately you must discard formulas and use your own language, words that are *you*, it helps to have a variety of ways of communicating your understanding of clients' feelings and emotions. It keeps you from being wooden in your responses. Consider this example: The client tells you that she has just been given the kind of job she has been looking for for the past two years. Here are some possible responses to her emotion.

- **Single word.** You're really happy.
- **A phrase.** You're on cloud nine.
- **Experiential statement.** You feel you finally got what you deserve.
- **Behavioral statement.** You feel like going out and celebrating.

Obviously, your responses to clients should be you, not canned responses from a textbook. With experience, you can extend your range of expression at the service of your clients.

**Respond to the client's experiences and behaviors.** The "because . . ." in the formula is to be followed by an indication of the experiences and behaviors that underlie the client's feelings. In the following example, the client, a graduate student in law school, is venting his frustration.

**CLIENT (heatedly):** You know why he got an A? He took my notes and disappeared. I didn't get a chance to study them. And I never even confronted him about it.

**HELPER:** You feel angry because he stole your course notes and you let him get away with it.

The response specifies both the client's experience [the theft] and his behavior [in this case, a failure to act] that give rise to his distress.

In the next example, the client, who is hearing impaired, has been discussing ways of becoming, in her words, "a full-fledged member of my extended family." The discussion takes place through a combination of lipreading and signing.



**CLIENT** (enthusiastically): Here's what I intend to do. I'm going to stop fading to the side in family conversation groups. I'll be the best listener there. I'll get my thoughts across even if I have to use props. They're going to find out that I'm actually pretty smart.

**HELPER:** You feel excited because you've decided to seize your rightful place in family gatherings rather hoping that someone will hand it to you.

The client is setting her agenda (Stage II). The helper's response recognizes that she has made an important decision and expresses her determination to carry it out [decisions as internal actions].

A mugging victim has been talking to a counselor to help cope with his fears of going out. Before the mugging he had given no thought to urban problems. Now he tends to see menace everywhere.

**CLIENT:** This gradual approach of getting back in the swing seems to be working. Last night I went out without a companion. First time. I have to admit that I was scared. But I think I've learned how to be careful. I'm buying back my freedom bit by bit. Last night was important.

**HELPER:** You feel satisfied with the approach we've been taking because it paid off last night when you bought back a big chunk of your freedom.

The client is talking about the success of the action phase of the program. The helper's response recognizes the client's satisfaction with the success of the program and how important it is for the client to be both safe and free.

Another client, after a few sessions spread out over six months, says something like this:

**CLIENT** (talking in an animated way): I really think that things couldn't be going better. I'm doing very well at my new job, and my husband isn't just putting up with it. He thinks it's great. He and I are getting along better than ever, even sexually, and I never expected that. We're both working at our marriage. I guess I'm just waiting for the bubble to burst.

**HELPER:** You feel great because things have been going better than you ever expected—it's almost too good to be true.

**CLIENT:** I think there's a difference between being cautious and waiting for disaster to strike. I'll always be cautious, but I'm finding out that I can make things come true instead of sitting around waiting for them to happen as I usually do. I've got to keep making my own luck.

This client, too, talks about her experiences and behaviors and expresses feelings, the flavor of which is captured in the empathic response. The response, capturing as it does both the client's enthusiasm and her lingering fears, is quite useful because the client moves on to her need to make things happen.

The stylized formula "you feel . . . because . . ." has outlived its usefulness and will be dropped in the examples that follow. Experienced trainers use it only when it sounds natural. Otherwise they use ordinary language to express basic empathy. Furthermore, the formula has a flaw. That is, the "be-

cause” part comes before the “you feel” part. When ordinary language is used, the right order is easily maintained: “He would always interrupt you at the busiest time of the day and that’s what really bugged you.”

## Principles to Guide the Use of Basic Empathy

Here are a number of principles that can guide you in your use of empathy. Remember that they are principles, not formulas.

**Use empathy at every stage and step of the helping process.** Basic empathic understanding is a useful response at every stage and every step of the helping process. Here are some examples.

- A teenager in his third year of high school who has just found out that he is moving with his family to a different city: “You feel sad, maybe even a bit betrayed, because moving means leaving all your friends.” (Stage I—understanding and clarification)
- A woman who has been discussing the trade-offs between marriage and career: “You feel ambivalent because if you marry Jim, you might not be able to have the kind of career you’d like.” (Stage II—options among goals)
- A man who is choosing to try to control his cholesterol level without taking a medicine whose side effects worry him: “You feel relieved because sticking to the diet and exercise might mean that you won’t have to take any medicine.” (Stage III—choosing action strategies)
- A married couple who have been struggling to put into practice a few strategies to improve their communication with each other: “You feel annoyed with yourselves because you didn’t even accomplish the simple active listening goals you set for yourselves.” (action phase)

Basic empathy, as a mode of human contact, a relationship builder, a conversational lubricant, a perception-checking intervention, and a mild form of social influence, is always useful. Driscoll (1984), in his common-sense way, referred to empathic statements as “nickel-and-dime interventions which each contribute only a smidgen of therapeutic movement, but without which the course of therapeutic progress would be markedly slower” (p. 90). Since empathy provides a continual trickle of understanding, it is a way of providing support throughout the helping process. It is never wrong to let clients know that you are trying to understand them from their frame of reference. Clients who feel they are being understood participate more effectively and more fully in the helping process. Empathy helps build trust. Basic empathy paves the way for stronger interventions on the part of the helper, such as challenging.

**Respond selectively to core messages.** It is impossible to respond with empathy to everything a client says. Therefore, as you listen to clients, try to identify and respond to what you believe are *core* messages—that is, the *heart*

of what the client is saying and expressing, especially if the client speaks at any length. Sometimes this selectivity means paying particular attention to one or two messages even though the client communicates many. For instance, a young woman, in discussing her doubts about marrying her companion, says that she is tired of his sloppy habits, is not really interested in his friends, wonders about his lack of intellectual curiosity, is dismayed at his relatively low level of career aspirations, but vehemently resents the fact that he faults her for being highly ambitious.

**COUNSELOR:** The whole picture doesn't look very promising, but the mismatch in career expectations is especially troubling.

In this example, the client herself highlights what is core, and the counselor follows her lead. Of course, since clients are not always so obliging, helpers must continually ask themselves, "What is key? What is most important here?" and then find ways of checking it out with the client. This helps clients sort out things that are not clear in their own minds.

At other times selectivity means focusing on experiences or actions or feelings rather than all three. Consider the following example of a client who is experiencing stress because of his wife's health and because of concerns at work.

**CLIENT:** This week I tried to get my wife to see the doctor, but she refused, even though she fainted a couple of times. The kids had no school, so they were underfoot almost constantly. I haven't been able to finish a report my boss expects from me next Monday.

**HELPER:** It's been a lousy, overwhelming week all the way around.

**CLIENT:** As bad as they come. When things are lousy both at home and at work, there's no place for me to relax. I just want to get the hell out of the house and find some place forget it all. . . . But I can't.

Here the counselor chooses to emphasize the feelings of the client, because she believes that his feelings of frustration and irritation are what is uppermost in his consciousness right now. At another time or with another client, the emphasis might be quite different.

In the next example, a young woman is talking about her problems with her father.

**CLIENT:** My dad yelled at me all the time last year about how I dress. But just last week I heard him telling someone how nice I looked. He yells at my sister about the same things he ignores when my younger brother does them. Sometimes he's really nice with my mother and other times—too much of the time—he's just awful: demanding, grouchy, sarcastic.

**HELPER:** The inconsistency is killing you.

**CLIENT:** Absolutely! It's hard for all of us to know where we stand. I hate coming home when I'm not sure which "dad" will be there. Sometimes I come late to avoid all this. But that makes him even madder.

In this response, the counselor emphasizes the client's experience of her father's inconsistency. It hits the mark and she explores the problem situation further.

Responding to core messages is also the social-influence process. The search for core messages is a selection process. The helper believes that the messages selected for attention are core, not just for himself or herself, but primarily for the client. But the helper also believes, at some level, that certain messages *should* be important for the client. If true dialogue with the client is established, this does not rob clients of their self-responsibility. Everything gets checked out.

**Respond to the context, not just the words.** A good empathic response is not based just on the client's immediate words and nonverbal behavior. It also takes into account the context of what is said, everything that "surrounds" and permeates a client's statement. This client may be in crisis. That client may be doing a more leisurely "taking stock" of where he is in life. You are listening to clients in the context of their lives.

For example, Jeff, a white teenager, is accused of beating a black youth whose car stalled in a white neighborhood. The beaten youth is still in a coma. When Jeff talks to a court-appointed counselor, the counselor listens to what Jeff says in light of Jeff's upbringing and environment. The context includes the racist attitudes of many people in his blue-collar neighborhood, the sporadic violence there, the fact that his father died when Jeff was in primary school, a somewhat indulgent mother with a history of alcoholism, and easy access to soft drugs. The following interchange takes place.

**CLIENT:** I don't know why I did it. I just did it, me and these other guys. We'd been drinking a bit and smoking up a bit—but not too much. It was just the whole thing.

**HELPER:** Looking back, it's almost like it's something that happened rather than something you did, and yet you know, somewhat bitterly, that you actually did it.

**CLIENT:** More than bitter! I've screwed up the rest of my life. It's not like I got up that morning saying that I was going to bash someone that day.

The counselor's response is in no way an attempt to excuse Jeff's behavior, but it does factor in some of the environmental realities. Later on he will challenge Jeff to decide whether his environment—prejudices, gang membership, family history—is to own him or whether, to the degree that this is possible, he is to own his environment.

**Use empathy to stimulate movement in the helping process.** Although empathy is an excellent tool for building the helping relationship, it also needs to serve the goals of the helping process. Therefore, empathy is useful to the degree that it helps the client *move forward*. What does "move forward"

mean? That depends on the stage or step in focus. For instance, empathy helps clients move forward in Stage I if it helps them explore a problem situation or an undeveloped opportunity more fully. Empathy helps clients move forward in Stage II to the degree that it helps them identify and explore possibilities for a better future, craft a change agenda, or discuss commitment to that agenda. Moving forward in Stage III means clarifying action strategies, choosing specific things to do, and setting up a plan. In the action phase, moving forward means identifying obstacles to action, overcoming them, and accomplishing goals.

In the following example, a somewhat stressed trainee in a counseling program is talking to his supervisor.

**TRAINEE:** I don't think I'm going to make a good counselor. The other people in the program seem brighter than I am. Others seem to be picking up the knack of empathy faster than I am. I'm still afraid of responding directly to others, even with empathy. I think I should reevaluate my participation in the program.

**TRAINER:** This sense of inadequacy is getting you down, perhaps even enough to make you begin wondering whether you should be here at all.

**TRAINEE:** And yet I know that giving up is part of the problem, part of my style. I'm not the brightest, but I'm certainly not dumb, either. The way I compare myself to others is not very useful. I know that I've been picking up some of these skills. I do attend and listen well. I'm perceptive even though at times I have a hard time sharing these perceptions with others.

When the trainer "hits the mark," the trainee moves forward and explores his tendencies to give up, compare himself unfavorably with others, and underestimate his successes.

In the next example, a young woman visits the student services center at her college to discuss an unwanted pregnancy.

**CLIENT:** And so here I am, two months pregnant. I don't want to be pregnant. I'm not married, and I don't even love the father. To tell the truth, I don't even think I like him. Oh, Lord, this is something that happens to other people, not me! I wake up thinking this whole thing is unreal. Now people are trying to push me toward abortion.

**HELPER:** You're still so amazed that it's almost impossible to accept that it's true. To make things worse, people are telling you what to do.

**CLIENT:** Amazed? I'm stupefied! Mainly, at my own stupidity for getting myself into this. I've never had such an expensive lesson in my life. But I've decided one thing. No one, no one is going to tell me what to do now. I'll make my own decisions.

After the helper's empathy, self-recrimination over lack of self-responsibility leads the client to take a stance on responsible decision making.

Basic empathic statements that hit the mark put pressure on the client to move forward. So basic empathy itself, even though it is a communication of understanding, is also part of the social-influence process discussed in Chapter 3.

**Recover from inaccurate understanding.** Although helpers should strive to be accurate in the understanding they communicate, all helpers can be somewhat inaccurate at times. You may think you understand the client and what he or she has said only to find out, when you share your understanding, that you were off the mark. Therefore, empathy is a perception-checking tool. If the helper's response is accurate, the client often tends to confirm its accuracy in two ways. The first is some kind of verbal or nonverbal indication that the helper is right. That is, the client nods or gives some other nonverbal cue or uses some assenting word or phrase such as "that's right" or "exactly." This happens in the following example, in which a client who has been arrested for selling drugs is talking to his probation officer.

**HELPER:** So your neighborhood makes it easy to do things that can get you into trouble.

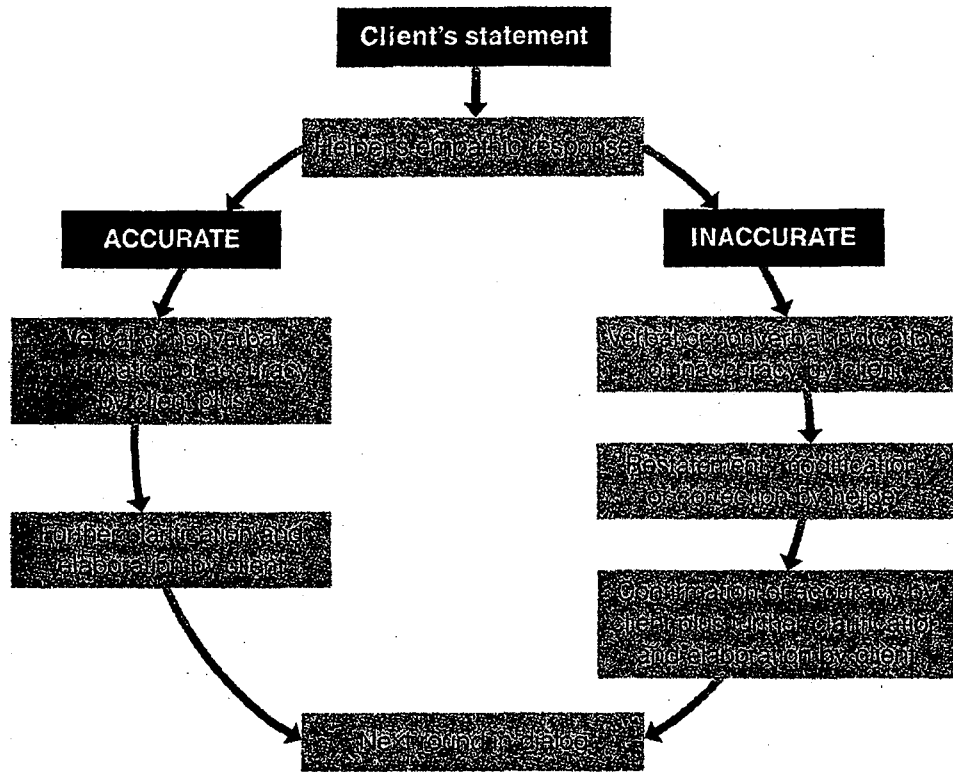
**CLIENT:** You bet it does! For instance, everyone's selling drugs. You not only end up using them, but you begin to think about pushing them. It's just too easy.

The second and more substantive way in which clients acknowledge the accuracy of the helper's response is by moving forward in the helping process—for instance, by clarifying the problem situation or preferred-scenario possibilities more fully. In the preceding example, the client not only acknowledges the accuracy of the helper's empathy verbally—"you bet it does"—but, more important, also outlines the problem situation in greater detail. If the helper again responds with empathy, this leads to the next cycle. The problem situation becomes increasingly clear in light of specific experiences, behaviors, and feelings.

On the other hand, when a response is inaccurate, the client often lets the counselor know in different ways: He or she may stop dead, fumble around, go off on a new tangent, tell the counselor "That's not exactly what I meant," or even try to provide empathy for the counselor to get him or her back on track. A helper who is alert to these cues can get back on track. Ben, a man who lost his wife and daughter in a train crash, has been talking about the changes that have taken place since the accident.

**HELPER:** So you don't want to do a lot of the things you used to do before the accident. For instance, you don't want to socialize much anymore.

**BEN (pausing a long time):** Well, I'm not sure that it's a question of wanting to or not. I mean that it takes much more energy to do a lot of things. It takes so much energy for me just to phone others to get together. It takes so much energy sometimes being with others that I just don't try. It's as if there's a weight on my soul a lot of the time.



**FIGURE 5-1**  
The Movement Caused by Accurate and Inaccurate Empathy

**HELPER:** It's like a movie of a man in slow motion—it's so hard to do almost anything.

**BEN:** I'm in low gear, grinding away. And I don't know how to get out of it.

Ben says that it is not a question of motivation but of energy. The difference is important to him. By picking up on it, the helper gets the interview back on track. If you are intent on understanding your clients, they will not be put off by occasional inaccuracies on your part. Figure 5-1 indicates two different paths—one made when helpers hit the mark in their communication of empathy, the other when they are inaccurate and then recover.

**Use empathy as a way of bridging diversity gaps.** This principle is a corollary of the preceding two. Empathy based on effective attending and listening is one of the most important tools you have in interacting with clients who differ from you in significant ways. In this context Scott and Borodovsky (1990) referred to empathic listening as “cultural role taking.” They could have said “diversity role taking.” In the following example, a younger white male counselor is talking with an elderly African American woman who has recently lost her husband. She is in the hospital with a broken leg.

**CLIENT:** I hear they try to get you out of these places as quick as possible. But I seem to be lying around here doing nothing. Jimmy [her late husband] wouldn't even recognize me.

**HELPER:** It's pretty depressing to have this happen so close to losing your husband.

**CLIENT:** Oh, I'm not depressed. I just want to get out of here and get back to doing things at home. Jimmy's gone, but there's plenty of people around there to help me take care of myself.

**HELPER:** Getting back into the swing of things is the best medicine for you.

**CLIENT:** Now you got it right. What I need right now is to know when I can go home and what I need to do for my leg once I get there. I've got to mobilize things.

The helper makes assumptions that might be true for him and his culture, but they miss the mark with the client. She's taking her problems in stride and counting on her social system and a return to everyday household life to keep her going. The helper's second response hits the mark and she, in Stage II fashion, outlines some of her needs.

Don't pretend to understand. Clients are sometimes confused, distracted, and in a highly emotional state. All these conditions affect the clarity of what they are saying about themselves. Helpers may fail to pick up what the client is saying because of the client's confusion or because they themselves have become distracted in one way or another. In any case, it's a mistake to feign understanding. Genuine helpers admit that they are lost and then work to get back on track again. A statement like "I think I've lost you. Could we go over that once more?" indicates that you think it important to stay with the client. It is a sign of respect. Admitting that you're lost is infinitely preferable to such clichés as "uh-huh," "ummmm," and "I understand."

## POOR SUBSTITUTES FOR EMPATHY

Many responses that novice or inept helpers make are really poor substitutes for accurate empathy. An example will be used to illustrate a range of poor responses. Robin is a young woman who has just started a career in law. This is her second visit to a counselor in private practice. In the first session she said she wanted to "talk through" some issues relating to the "transition" from school to business life. She appeared quite self-confident. In this session, after talking about a number of transition issues, she begins speaking in a rather strained voice and avoids eye contact with the counselor.

**ROBIN:** Something else is bothering me a bit. . . . Maybe it shouldn't. After all, I've got the kind of career that a lot of women would die for. Well—I'm glad that none of my feminist colleagues is around—I don't like the way I look. I'm neither fat nor thin, but I don't really like the shape of my body. And I'm uncomfortable with some of my facial features. Maybe this is a strange time



of life to start thinking about this. In two years I'll be thirty. . . . I bet I seem like an affluent, self-centered yuppie . . . .

Robin pauses and looks at a piece of art on the wall. What would *you* do or say? Here are some possibilities that are better avoided.

- **No response.** It can be a mistake to say nothing, though cultures differ widely in how they deal with silence (Sue, 1990). In North American culture, generally speaking, if the client says something significant, respond to it, however briefly. Otherwise the client may think that what he or she has just said doesn't merit a response. Don't leave Robin sitting there stewing in her own juices. A skilled helper would realize that a woman's nonacceptance of her body could generalize to other aspects of her life (Dworkin & Kerr, 1987; Worsley, 1981) and therefore should not be treated as just a "vanity" problem.

- **Distracting questions.** A counselor might ask something like, "Is this something new now that you've started working?" This response ignores what Robin has said and the feelings she has expressed and focuses rather on the helper's agenda to get more information.

- **Clichés.** A counselor might say, "The workplace is competitive. It's not uncommon for issues like this to come up." This is cliché-talk. It turns the helper into an instructor and may sound dismissive to the client. Clichés are hollow. The helper is saying, in effect, "You don't really have a problem at all, at least not a serious one."

- **Interpretations.** A counselor might say something like this: "Robin, my bet is that your body-image concerns are probably just a symptom. I've got a hunch that you're not really accepting yourself. That's the real problem." The counselor fails to respond to the client's feelings and also distorts the content of the client's communication. The response implies that what is really important is hidden from the client.

- **Advice.** Another counselor might say, "Hey, don't let this worry you. You'll be so involved with work issues that these concerns will disappear." Advice giving at this stage is out of order and, to make things worse, the advice given has a cliché flavor to it. The values of self-responsibility suggest that advice giving be kept to a minimum.

- **Parroting.** Empathy does not consist of merely repeating what the client has said. Such parroting is a parody of empathy.

**COUNSELOR:** So, Robin, even though you have a great job, one that many people would envy, it's your feelings about your body that bother you. The feminist in you recoils a bit from this news. But there are things you don't like—your body shape, some facial features. You're wondering why this is hitting you now. You also seem to be ashamed of these thoughts. "Maybe I'm just self-centered," is what you're saying to yourself.

This may be verbally accurate, but it sounds awful. Mere repetition carries no sense of real understanding of, no sense of being with, the client. Since real understanding is in some way "processed" by you, since it passes through you,

it should convey some part of yourself. Empathy always adds *something*. To avoid parroting, come at what the client has said from a slightly different angle, use different words, change the order, refer to an expressed but unnamed emotion—in a word, do whatever you can to let the client know that you are *working* at understanding.

- **Sympathy and agreement.** Being empathic is not the same as agreeing with the client or being sympathetic. An expression of sympathy has much more in common with pity, compassion, commiseration, and condolence than with empathic understanding. Although these are fully human traits, they are not particularly useful in counseling. Sympathy denotes agreement, whereas empathy denotes understanding and acceptance of the person of the client. At its worst, sympathy is a form of collusion with the client. Note the difference between Counselor A's response to Robin and Counselor B's response.

COUNSELOR A: This is not an easy thing to struggle with. It's even harder to talk about. It's even worse for someone who is as self-confident as you usually are.

ROBIN: I guess so.

Note that Robin responds with halfhearted collusion-talk. The helping process does not move forward.

COUNSELOR B: You've got some misgivings about your bodily characteristics, yet you wonder whether you're even justified talking about it.

ROBIN: I know. It's like I'm ashamed of my being ashamed. What's worse, I get so preoccupied with my body that I stop thinking of myself as a person. It blinds me to the fact that I more-or less like the person I am.

Counselor B's response gives Robin the opportunity to deal with her immediate anxiety and then to explore her problem situation more fully.

## TACTICS FOR COMMUNICATING EMPATHY

The principles outlined previously provide strategies for the use of basic empathy. Here are a few hints—tactics, if you will—to help you improve the quality of your empathic responses.

- **Give yourself time to think.** Beginners sometimes jump in too quickly with an empathic response when the client pauses. "Too quickly" means that they do not give themselves enough time to reflect on what the client has just said in order to identify the core message being communicated. Even the experts pause and allow themselves to assimilate what the client is saying.

- **Use short responses.** I find that the helping process goes best when I engage the client in a dialogue rather than give speeches or allow the client to ramble. In a dialogue the helper's responses can be relatively frequent, but

lean and trim. In trying to be accurate, the beginner is often long-winded, especially if he or she waits too long to respond. Again, the question "What is the core of what this person is saying to me?" can help you make your responses short, concrete, and accurate.

- *Gear your response to the client, but remain yourself.* If a client speaks animatedly, telling the helper of his elation over various successes in his life, and she replies accurately but in a flat, dull voice, her response is not fully empathic. This does not mean that helpers should mimic their clients. It means that part of being with the client is sharing in a reasonable way in his or her emotional tone. Consider this example:

**TWELVE-YEAR-OLD CLIENT:** My teacher started picking on me from the first day of class. I don't fool around more than anyone else in class, but she gets me anytime I do. I think she's picking on me because she doesn't like me. She doesn't yell at Bill Smith, and he acts funnier than I do.

**COUNSELOR A:** This is a bit perplexing. You wonder why she singles you out for so much discipline.

Counselor A's language is stilted, not in tune with the way a 12-year-old speaks.

**COUNSELOR B:** You're mad because the way she picks on you seems unfair.

On the other hand, helpers should not adopt a language that is not their own just to be on the client's wavelength. A white counselor speaking African American slang or vice versa sounds ludicrous.

## A CAUTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHIC RELATIONSHIPS

In day-to-day interpersonal communication, empathy is a tool of civility. Making an effort to get in touch with another's frame of reference sends a message of respect. Therefore, empathy plays an important part in building relationships. It gives concrete expression to the value of respect. However, the communication skills as they are practiced in helping settings don't automatically transfer to the ordinary social settings of everyday life. In everyday life, empathy does not necessarily have to be put into words. Given enough time, people can establish empathic relationships with one another in which understanding is communicated in a variety of rich and subtle ways without necessarily being put into words. A simple glance across a room as one spouse sees the other trapped in a conversation with a person he or she does not want to be with can communicate worlds of understanding. The glance says, "I know you feel caught. I know you don't want to hurt the other person's feelings. I can feel the struggles going on inside you. I also know that you'd like me to rescue you, if I can do so tactfully."

People with empathic relationships often express empathy in actions. An arm around the shoulders of someone who has just suffered a defeat can

## BOX 5-1

**Suggestions for the Use of Empathy**

1. Remember that empathy is, ideally, a way of being and not just a professional role or communication skill.
2. Attend carefully, both physically and psychologically, and listen to the client's point of view.
3. Try to set your judgments and biases aside for the moment and walk in the shoes of the client.
4. As the client speaks, listen especially for core messages.
5. Listen to both verbal and nonverbal messages and their context.
6. Respond fairly frequently, but briefly, to the client's core messages.
7. Be flexible and tentative enough that the client does not feel pinned down.
8. Use empathy to keep the client focused on important issues.
9. Move gradually toward the exploration of sensitive topics and feelings.
10. After responding with empathy, attend carefully to cues that either confirm or deny the accuracy of your response.
11. Determine whether your empathic responses are helping the client remain focused while developing and clarifying important issues.
12. Note signs of client stress or resistance; try to judge whether these arise because you are inaccurate or because you are too accurate.
13. Keep in mind that the communication skill of empathy, however important, is a tool to help clients see themselves and their problem situations more clearly with a view to managing them more effectively.

be filled with both support and empathy. I was in the home of a poor family when the father came bursting through the front door shouting, "I got the job!" His wife, without saying a word, went to the refrigerator, got a bottle of beer with a makeshift label on which "Champagne" had been written and offered it to her husband. Beer never tasted so good. Some people do enter caring into the world of another and are "with" him or her but are unable to communicate understanding through words. Of course, the more frequent use of verbal empathy in everyday life is highly desirable. Verbal empathy can play an important role in developing empathic relationships. Box 5-1 summarizes the main points about the use of empathy as a communication skill.