

An Introduction to Empathy

What is empathy? How do I demonstrate it?

Empathy shows that you appreciate, understand and accept another person's emotional state.

To show empathy, you should practise the following skills:

- Identify the other person's emotional state accurately
- Acknowledge it

It is very important that you are able to identify emotions. Is this person upset or angry? How upset or angry are they? If they are furiously angry, then by saying, *"I can see that you are a bit angry,"* you are indicating that you have not really received their message (and will probably increase their anger). You need to identify the **TYPE** and the **INTENSITY** of the emotion accurately.

What skills should I practise?

There are 5 types of empathic response¹

1. reflective – this is the easiest one to practise initially

"I can see that you are"

"You seem to be about this"

2. legitimizing – involves putting yourself in the other person's place. This is more difficult, unless you have had a similar experience, and no two situations are ever exactly the same

"I can understand why you are feeling"

3. supportive – suggests that you want to help in a constructive way

"I'll be here if you have any questions or need any advice"

4. partnership-building – suggests that you would like to work as a team to solve the problem

"We'll work together to do what's best"

5. respectful – expresses admiration for the way in which the other person is dealing with the situation

"You are coping so well with this..."

Non-verbal empathic response

Empathy can also be expressed non-verbally, through

- tone of voice (lowered, sympathetic)
- facial expression (concerned)
- touch (putting a hand on the other person's arm)

Again, these skills can be practised. However, it is important to use aspects of your own personality to express empathy. Try out phrases and behaviours that fit in with your own personality and style.

Practice and feedback

Review of videotaped encounters will allow you to reflect on what works for your own personality, and what doesn't. For example, don't use touch if you don't feel comfortable doing so. It will look false and forced.

You will also develop your own favourite phrases to use. This does not mean that you are "switching to autopilot" when faced with an emotional client, but that you are using developed skills to make that client feel better. You cannot respond emotionally to every difficult situation in practice, or you will quickly suffer "burnout".

Why use empathy?

Empathy is a vital part of building the relationship with the client. This may contribute to increased satisfaction with the consultation², to reduced complaints³ and even, in some cases, to better health outcomes for the patient⁴.

References

1. Cohen-Cole SA, Bird J. Function 2: Building rapport and responding to patient's emotions (relationship skills). In Cohen-Cole SA *The Medical Interview: The Three-Function Approach*. St Louis, MO Mosby-Year Book 1991, pp21-27
2. Korsch BM, Gozzi EK, Francis V. Gaps in doctor-patient communication. 1. Doctor-patient interaction and patient satisfaction. *Pediatrics*. 1968 Nov; 42(5):855-71
3. Levinson W, Roter DL, Mullooly JP, Dull VT, Frankel RM. Physician-patient communication. The relationship with malpractice claims among primary care physicians and surgeons. *JAMA*. 1997 Feb 19; 277(7):553-9.
4. Kaplan SH, Greenfield S, Ware JE Jr. Assessing the effects of physician-patient interactions on the outcomes of chronic disease. *Med Care*. 1989 Mar 27(Suppl):S110-27