



Empathy is Your Lifeline, Never Let it Go

Exercise – Welcome to Your Nightmare

Since one of the main goals of this book is to enhance skills for working with difficult clients, it is useful to revisit thinking about some examples that impact you. So, similar to the opening exercise of this book, again think about an extremely challenging client you may have worked with. (Or, if you have limited or no experience, use your imagination) Try to dig deep this time to give thought to someone who may be considered to be a “nightmare client”. This type of client is usually a person who requires a disproportionate amount of time and other counseling resources to manage. To put it in perspective, the nightmare client may demands more of your focus, triggers your own anxieties and/or frustrations, instigates or “riles up” other clients in your program and simply makes you work harder than you would like to at times. Once you have this real (or if needed imaginary) person in mind, consider what it is like to be that client. The goal is to look at empathizing with our more difficult clients. So put yourself in your nightmare client’s shoes and think about the following from that client’s perspective.



Head – What do you suppose is on his/her mind most of the time? What do you think he/she thinks about when he/she is alone? Does he/she have mental health issues? Any history of trauma? Abuse history? Any other cognitive or learning limitations present? What do you think it would be like to be in this client’s head for any extended period and think his/her thoughts, feel his/her feelings and share his/her memories

Mouth – What kinds of things does he/she say or talk about?

Eyes – What kinds of things get his/her attention and focus?

Heart – Who/What does he/she care about? What motivates this person?

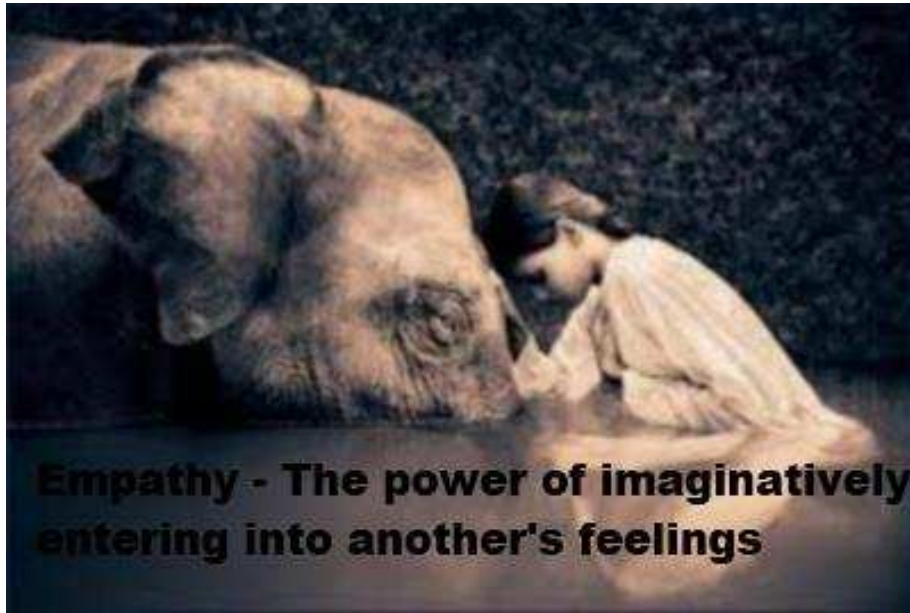
Gut – Deep down what is he/she afraid of?

Feet – Where do his/her feet take him/her each day?

Hands – Who does he/she reach out too? (Family, other relationships). What does he/she like to do? (Work, hobbies, criminal behavior, fighting, other activities)

Back – What kind of pressure is he/she under? (Unemployment, jail, etc.?) What kind of “weight” does he/she carry on his/her shoulders?

The more challenging the client, the more you may need to get into their world



It is critical to be able to empathize with our clients, even the ones we struggle with the most. Especially them. Empathy is a counselor's greatest and most often used tool. Empathy is the best starting point, and it is the best place for a counselor to go when there is nowhere else to go. In that sense, in a difficult moment in any difficult session, empathy can be like your anchor, keeping you grounded as a counselor especially when you may not be sure what to do or what to say next. Regardless of one's experience and training as a counselor, we all, from time to time find ourselves sitting in the room with a client, group or family and thinking to ourselves "Where do I go with this?" When faced with those situations, we can always just go back to the most primary counseling skill which is **empathy**. Confused? Frustrated? Lost? (Those feelings can happen to the best of us from time to time in any given counseling session) The first step is to get back to the basics and ground yourself by focusing on empathy and you cannot go wrong. *Empathy is our lifeline* when things get difficult or when we are not sure what the next move is.

What exactly is empathy?

Empathy – n - Direct identification with, understanding of, and vicarious experience of another person's situation, feelings, and motives.

Empathy is all about understanding. When we don't understand, empathy involves making our best effort to try to understand often using our imagination to fill in the gaps. The Escalator takes the definition of empathy to a deeper level. To truly be able to empathetic in a clinical setting we need to learn to practice and teach our clients to practice the following:

Empathy without agreement – *The ability to gain understanding of another person's situation, feelings, motives, or actions, even when we do not personally agree with that persons situation, feelings, motives or actions or when this conflicts with our personal values or morals. Striving to set aside judgement in an attempt to enhance interpersonal connection, vision and comprehension*

As we have outlined earlier, it is usually much easier to understand something when we agree with it. There is no great reward out there for any of us who can understand those things we personally value and basically would do ourselves. For example, suppose a client told you she was a single mother left



alone with three kids after her husband abandoned her. This client had to work two jobs so she was overwhelmed and poor with less time to spend taking care of her kids than she would like. Suppose this woman confessed to you that on a few limited past occasions she had given her kids a one quick smack on the behind particularly when one of her children consistently misbehaved, such as an instance when her son would not stop running toward the busy street, ignoring her repeated efforts to verbally redirect him to safety. She assured you this was not recent or recurring nor was it her primary choice of discipline and she is educated in other forms of nonphysical parenting which she prefers. In addition, her children present as healthy, well-adjusted and well-cared for in spite of her limited resources. You otherwise see no signs of injury, abuse or neglect. Now suppose you, as her counselor, were able to empathize with this client by imagining that if you were in the same difficult situation that she is in, you could understand resorting to the same behavior if you had to, even if it would not your first choice of action. In that case, empathy would be a lot easier because you could imaginatively see yourself in the same situation and therefore better understand where this client is coming from. Now instead suppose that based on your personal values you strongly believe that it is never okay to hit a child under any circumstances. Learning to empathize, in that case would be much more difficult *but it is still just as necessary* to work effectively with this client. Therefore, it is critical that we learn empathy even when we do not agree. So in this case, regardless of whether or not you agree with this persons actions, empathy is needed. Our clients are going to do things that contradict our values but that cannot limit our ability to do our best to empathize with them. It is not only important that we as counselors learn to practice empathy without agreement, we also need to learn to teach it to our clients as well. This concept of empathy without agreement is repeated throughout this book because it is so important across so many areas of insight and motivation building and engagement in counseling.

So when we say ***empathy is your lifeline*** as a counselor, what is meant is that when you feel like you have nowhere else to go in a session, you always have empathy to rely upon. Empathy is at the root and basic starting point of counseling skills so it is a safe place to return to and to refocus yourself in any difficult or confusing counseling situation. Think of some common scenarios that can be incredibly challenging and often unexpected in a group, individual or family counseling session:

>A client reveals something important beyond your immediate scope of experience or readiness –
Suppose you have a rapport with someone over a while and then this client suddenly brings something to the fore that you have little experience with or that you are unprepared to deal with. Obviously if it is a distinct issue that requires the intervention of some kind of specialist such as a medical issue or other disorder far outside the scope of your abilities or expertise, then you would make an appropriate referral and assist the client with linkages to needed services for this issue. However, what if it was an issue that may not be your specialty per se, but it was not beyond your expertise to at least try to start to assess and address and the client is asking specifically for your help. There are many scenarios that could fit this description. Suppose, for example, that your client revealed for the first time they were in a gang and wanted to get out and you have basic working knowledge of gangs but you are no expert. Or, suppose a client told you that he or she was not only are addicted to drugs but also to sex or gambling which you understand, but also were not extensively trained with either. What if your client told you they were having an affair behind their spouse's back with their spouse's sibling and could not stop? There are literally hundreds if not thousands of scenarios that can and do come up that may test our abilities especially because not one of us has "seen it all" Nevertheless, our clients often call upon us for help with these complex and unexpected issues. No matter how long you have been counselor, there will always be something new now and then. So what do you do when you, as the counselor are sitting in a session and you don't know exactly what to do or say? To complicate matters, what if you feel strongly opposed to



what you may have just learned about because of your own values? Returning to the example where the client reveals to you he is cheating on his spouse with her sister: Now imagine if you had previously met the wife during family work and you found her to be kind, supportive and loving of your client throughout his addiction. Might that trigger your sense of values particularly when you can personally sense the level of deep betrayal of this seemingly innocent person? In this example and any other of the thousands of perplexing scenarios that can arise and catch you off guard, where do you go as a counselor? **Empathy** is the answer and when necessary you must strive to practice empathy even when you personally do not agree. Your job is to try to put your own values to the side and take time to learn and understand the client's side of the story, without judgment. Being ready to get back to basic empathy can help you with these types of unexpected revelations that can, and so often do, come up in substance abuse and mental health counseling, that can temporarily catch you off your game, no matter how prepared and experienced you may be.

>When you are in a family session and more there are two sides directly opposed to each other who cannot agree: In such a scenario, your lifeline is to not only use empathy yourself, but teach you clients to understand and practice empathy without agreement. A great way to break up a family argument is to one at a time get each side to try to empathize with the other stressing the importance of trying to understand one another even if they do not agree. Consider an example:

CLIENT- My mother is unreasonable and I can't stand her. She won't just leave me alone and let me get drunk with my friends on the weekends. I have am passing my first semester in community college so I don't get why she wont get off of my back

MOTHER – He was already arrested once for DUI but got the charges dropped because I hired him a lawyer which I had to pay for. Most of the kids he hangs around with have been arrested already too. It's a matter of time before he gets in trouble again and I can't take the worrying about waiting for that to happen again!

CLIENT – C'mon Mom, get off my back. I am 20 now and it is not your problem. Why don't you just leave me alone and stop worrying and let me worry about my own life. Why do you keep making me do all of this counseling!

[We all have been is a similar situation which can go on and on with lots of arguing and ongoing disagreement that may go nowhere. Learning to teach our clients, and in this case, their families, **empathy without agreement** is an excellent tool. Below is an effective counselor response, teaching the client and his mother empathy without agreement:]

COUNSELOR – OK, John it sounds like you are saying that you want your mother to just get off of your back and let you make your own decisions and make your own mistakes and you feel like you deserve some credit because you are passing your classes, right?

CLIENT Right, I am doing good, why can't she just cut it out already and just trust me!

COUNSELOR- Even if you do not *agree* with why your mom is worried about you, can you *understand* why she worries? – Remember I just want you to explain to me from her perspective even if you don't agree with it (Teaching client empathy without agreement)

CLIENT – Well I guess she thinks I am going to get in trouble again or fail out of school and I won't be a success in life if I keep drinking– But that's not going to happen! I am much more careful now!



COUNSELOR – Good, so you are saying that she worries about something bad happening, like you failing or getting arrested. I know you say that is not going to happen but being your mother, why do you think she is worried about all of that stuff? Why do you think she worries about you so much in her mind?

CLIENT – I guess it's because she loves me?

COUNSELOR - Right! (Session is now focused on a much more positive outlook than earlier because of empathy without agreement)

Of course it does not always go as easy as this example, but often it does. Sometimes more steps are required to get each side to use empathy to understand each other even in the face of disagreement. In the above scenario, I would then work with the mother to get her to try to understand why her child feels like she is worrying for no reason, even if the mother does not agree. It would be important to help mom remember what it was like to be a 20 year old trying to have fun but still make something out of himself. The closer you can get each side to at least start to understand each other, the easier it is to generate some productive discussion in session. Empathy without agreement is an essential counseling tool

For another brief and similar example read: [Empathy without Agreement](#)



>Situations where a group, or the majority of a group is challenging the educational material you are attempting to provide: When dealing with groups of resistant and unmotivated clients this comes up often. Empathy without agreement is an amazing tool to help keep the counseling session educational and informational without being argumentative. We, as counselors, cannot “out-argue” our clients or count on proving them wrong. Those simply are not effective strategies because even when you use facts to try to prove your viewpoint, resistant, less motivated and less insightful clients tend to stand their ground even at times if they have to resort to irrational arguments to support their viewpoint. When there is a prevailing difference of opinion, especially when clients try to create a “we” (the drug abusing clients) against you (the “misinformed” counselor) scenario, you as counselor should use empathy without agreement to diffuse the situation. Consider an example:

GROUP – LSD expands your mind and it is actually a really good thing because of that. OTHER GROUP MEMEBERS- “Yeah LSD is awesome, everyone should trip and open up their mind”

COUNSELOR – (Avoiding argument) OK then you say LSD isn't that bad, then tell me about some of the good things about it



GROUP – There was a guy in the 1970's who says he pitched a no hitter in the major leagues when he was on LSD. There are lots of musicians who wrote cool music when they were tripping and some great artists and painters who were on acid too

COUNSELOR – OK, I have heard some of those stories too. Now consider the other side, why do you think that counselors and others say that LSD can be a dangerous drug, even if you don't agree?

GROUP MEMBER – Well there is a dude in my town who was already a little "off" who started getting really crazy after he started tripping on LSD and he freaked us all out pretty bad. ANOTHER GROUP MEMBER – Yeah there is a guy in my town who went crazy from takin too much acid too and I think he ended up in an institution"

COUNSELOR – Good examples, thanks. That is actually one of the concerns of counselors, that if someone has pre-existing tendency toward mental illness, drugs like LSD can actually trigger a more serious psychotic episode. There is actually some research that shows that is true...

This session could have gone another way with the counselor and group engaging in an unproductive debate had the counselor allowed him or herself be baited into an argument. Rather, the counselor cleverly got the group to play devils' advocate and look at the other side of their own argument by working with them to try to understand the opposing viewpoint, even if they disagreed with it. Often it is all in the wording when providing educational information to potentially argumentative groups. Consider a few more examples of educational statements reframed from an "expert" approach instead using an "empathy without agreement" approach by the counselor. As you read these examples, think about the potential arguments that likely would ensue in a more resistant group after a counselor were to use the expert approach. Then consider how the "empathy without agreement" reframing of the same statement would reduce the likelihood of arguments and open up more interactive discussion:

1. *Expert Approach*: "Facts show that marijuana is a gateway* drug" (Group – "no way what a load of garbage!") [*This gateway topic is a repeat from earlier but it is so common it is worth revisiting*]

Statement reframed using *Empathy without Agreement*: "I am sure that most of you have heard people say that marijuana is a gateway drug, and based on some of our prior discussions I am willing to bet that many of you disagree with that. Still, even if you disagree, can you think of some reasons why some people think marijuana can be a gateway in some cases?" – (Group – productive discussion started)

2. *Expert Approach*: "Continuing to use drugs in spite of consequences is a strong indicator that someone is an addict. I know that many of you here have had many consequences already so you know what that means" (Group – Likely to take stance defending why they do not believe they are addicted)

Statement reframed using *Empathy without Agreement*: "Let's talk about consequences for a few minutes. What are some common consequences of abusing or misusing substances?" (Group discusses consequences) "So if experiencing consequences is supposed to tell someone to stop something that may not be good for them, why do you think that when people keep getting high even after they experience consequences, which is seen as a potential warning sign of addiction?" (Clients discuss this topic more openly, reviewing their understanding of what addiction is in a less defensive manner)



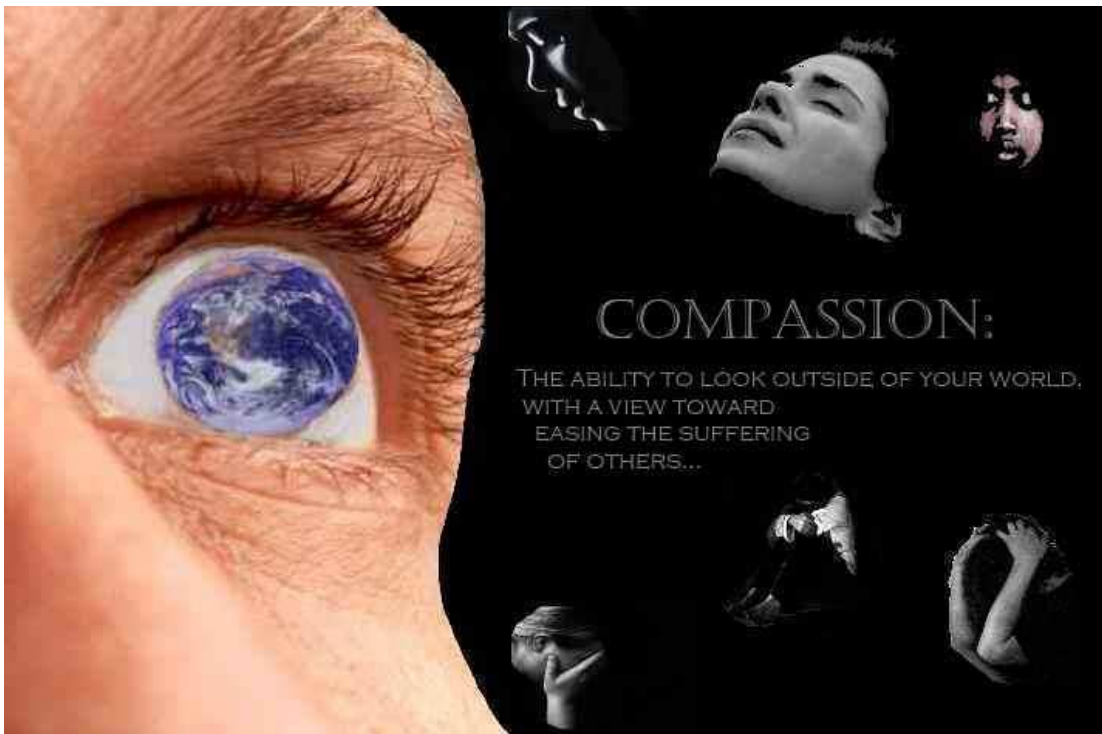
3. *Expert Approach*: “I have listed some of the signs of clinical depression on the board. After looking at these signs of depression, who here thinks that they may be clinically depressed? (If group has poor insight, expect a lot of denial)

Statement reframed using *Empathy without Agreement*: “What is your guys’ understanding of what depression is? What are some of the signs you know about? (Counselor lists group ideas on the board then adds some depressive symptoms they may have missed) “Great job. Now taking a look at this list that we made, even if it was just for a short time period, which of these have you ever personally experienced?” (Group begins more open discussion of depression and its symptoms in more open, less argumentative manner)

Empathy without agreement has helped so many counselors out of so many challenging situations. If you are not already using this tool, practice it and teach it to those you work with it and the results will speak for themselves, because it is never a bad time to use and practice empathy.

The preceding article is taken from:

[“The Tools of Engagement: Taking the Escalator Counselor Handbook” \(2017\)](#)



www.takingtheescalator.com/