

Communicating Empathy

Communicating empathy involves reflecting the client's feelings and the experiences and/or behaviours that underlie them. It is a simple process but is not a normative response in everyday conversation and so requires practice.

1. Formula and non-formula

Empathy can be expressed using the formula "you feel *emotion/intensity* because *experience/behaviour*."

While this formula can be used as is, the ideas can also be expressed using more natural language. You can test the accuracy of your response with the client and reframe your response if you are off the mark.

Examples

a. Married woman, 31, talking to a counsellor about her marriage: "I can't believe it! You know when Tom and I were here last week we made a contract that said that he would be home for dinner every evening and on time. Well, he came home on time every day this past week. I never dreamed that he would live up to his part of the bargain so completely" (Egan, 1985, p. 28)!

Formula: "You feel *great* because *he really stuck to his word*."
emotion *experience/behaviour*

Own words: "He fulfilled the contract beyond your expectations. Now that's a very pleasant surprise!"

b. Man, 40, talking about his unwell mother: "I know she's using her present illness to control me. How could a 'good' son refuse any of her requests at a time like this? (He pounds his fist on the arm of his chair.) But it's all part of a pattern. She's used one thing or another to control me all my life. If I let things go on like this, she'll make me feel responsible for her death" (Egan, 1985, p. 28)!

Formula: "You feel _____ because _____."

Own words: _____

c. Woman, 25, talking about her current boyfriend: "I can't quite figure him out. (She pauses, shakes her head slowly, and then speaks quite slowly.) I just can't figure out whether he really cares about me, or if he's just trying to get me into bed. I've been burned before; I don't want to get burned again" (Egan, 1985, pp. 28-29).

Formula: "You feel _____ because _____."

Own words: _____

2. Communicating empathy with clients facing dilemmas

Clients sometimes talk about conflicting values, experiences, behaviours, and emotions. Responding empathically requires also communicating an understanding of the conflict.

Examples

a. A woman, 32, talking to a counsellor about a possible abortion: “I'm going back and forth, back and forth. I say to myself, ‘Okay, I'll have the abortion,’ then that seems to handle my reluctance to have another child, and it means that Bill [her husband] will be relieved. I don't especially want another child, but he's totally opposed to it. So an abortion seems to be a way out. But the very next moment I begin thinking about the abortion itself or, even worse, how I'll feel about myself afterwards, and then I'm back at square one” (Egan, 1985, p. 31).

Identify the conflict or dilemma: An abortion might solve some problems, but it might also create some new ones.

Formula: “In one way, you feel *relieved* when you think about having the abortion, because this will *solve some very practical problems* for you and Bill, but almost at the same time you feel *apprehensive* because you're not at all sure what having an abortion means to you.”

Own words: “You're caught in the middle. Having an abortion might well solve some serious problems, and that would be a relief. But you're asking yourself, ‘What price am I going to pay?’”

b. Factory worker, 30: “Work is okay. I make a good living, and both my family and I like the money. My wife and I are both from poor homes, and we're living much better than we did when we were growing up. But the work I do is the same thing day after day. I may not be the brightest person in the world, but there's a lot more to me than I use on those machines” (Egan, 1985, p. 32).

Identify the conflict or dilemma: _____

Formula: “You feel _____ because _____.”

Own words: _____

3. Combining empathy and probes

A probe is a statement or question that asks a client to discuss an issue more fully. They can be used at any time to clarify issues, search for missing data, and expand perspectives.

Examples

a. A law student, 25, is talking to a Student Counsellor: “I learned yesterday that I've failed my course and that there's no recourse. I've seen everybody, but the door is shut tight. What a mess! I have no idea how I'll face my parents. They've paid for this and now I'll have to tell them that it's all down the drain” (Egan, 1985, p. 38).

Empathy: The whole situation sounds pretty desperate both here and at home. And it sounds so final.

What further information is needed to make the problem more concrete and clear?

Who did he actually see and precisely what kind of refusals did he get. Has the client actually thought through all the possibilities.

Probe: I'm not sure who you mean by 'everybody' and what doors were shut.

b. Woman, 27, talking to counsellor about a relationship that has just ended (she speaks in a rather matter-of-fact voice): "I came back from visiting my parents and found a letter from Gary. He said that he still loves me but that I'm just not the person for him. In the letter he thanked me for all the good times we had together these last three years. He asked me not to try to contact him because this would only make it more difficult for both of us" (Egan, 1985, p. 39).

Empathy: _____

What further information is needed to make the problem more concrete and clear?

Probe: _____

c. Woman, 31, talking to a counsellor about her job: "I just can't stand my job anymore! My boss is so unreasonable. He makes all sorts of ridiculous demands on me. The other women in the office are so stuffy, you can't talk to them. The men are after you all the time, you know, on the make. The pay is good, but I don't think it makes up for all the rest it's been going on like this for almost two years" (Egan, 1985, pp. 39-40).

Empathy: _____

What further information is needed to make the problem more concrete and clear?

Probe: _____

Egan, G. (1985). *Exercises in helping skills – A training manual to accompany the skilled helper* (3rd ed.). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Egan, G. (2002). *The Skilled Helper – A problem-management and opportunity-development approach to helping* (7th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.