

# EMPATHY

**Definition:** The counselor understands the client's feeling and experiences within the client's frame of reference and communicates that understanding without judgment. Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings, attitudes, roles and perceptions and world of another. The counselor uses an "as if" quality to sensing the client's world as one's own.

Carl Rogers described empathy as the capacity:

- to assume the internal frame of the client,
- to perceive the world as the client sees it, and the client as he or she perceives themselves,
- to lay aside perceptions from external frames of reference during this time,
- and to communicate this understanding back to the client.

## **What empathy is not:**

Sympathy: Here, the counselor identifies with and takes on the client's feelings. For example, the client expresses intense pain and the counselor then also experiences deep pain. Such merging of feeling can distract the counselor and prevent them from hearing and understanding the client.

Projection: This is when the counselor attributes their own feelings, perceptions or thoughts to the client. For example, the counselor may feel indignant about the way someone treated the client and therefore assumes that the client also feels indignant. In this case, the counselor is using his or her frame of reference, not the client's

## **Ways to Generate Empathic Responses**

Self-judgment: How would I feel in this situation? Here, don't assume that the client has equivalent feelings, and always express this hunch tentatively.

Normative judgment: How do people typically react in this situation: or, how do most people feel when using this nonverbal gesture? Again, this is a guess based on knowledge of other people and should be conveyed tentatively.

Differential judgment: Based mainly on the client's nonverbal behaviors, how does the client feel in this specific situation? This response is based on a particular moment, and may compare what the client is saying with how they are saying it.

## **Levels of Empathy**

A five-point scale is often used, as empathy is not a black or white condition.

Level 1 Empathy: At this level, the responses are irrelevant or inaccurate in reflecting the client's meaning. Often these responses involve subject changes, mistimed questions or advice, or evaluative statements.

Level 3 Empathy: This level of empathy is where the client's feelings and meanings are reflected accurately, but more on a surface level. Thus, the counselor conveys understanding of what the client has actually said or meant.

Level 5 Empathy: Higher levels of empathy convey an understanding of the deeper meaning of messages that are indirectly expressed or implied by the client. More advanced empathy involves the counselor's hunches based on specific cues. These hunches can help the client: identify emotional and behavioral themes; make connections between feelings, experiences and behaviors; explore hinted at areas; draw logical conclusions from premises; recognize overlooked areas; and acquire alternative frames of reference.