

## VIDEO TAPE PRACTICE IN EMPATHY

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This presentation of a semester-long counselor-client relationship between the author and her in-class client was submitted as part of a requirement for an introductory masters training course in counseling. It is being published following the faculty member's recommendation that it represents excellent achievement in demonstrating empathetic understanding, process, and outcome. A broader description of the course from which the presentation derives from can be reviewed in Hamilton, Carlson, and Sabol (2001, this issue, pp. 71-97). All participants in the below exercise have provided informed consent to publish this work.

**Therapist:** Hi Steve, how are you doing today? (Therapist: Leans in toward client, keeps eye contact through out session)

**Analysis:** Here I was trying to show my client that I genuinely cared for him and how he was doing.

**Client:** I'm doing all right, I guess. I don't know things are kind of rough lately.

**Therapist:** So they're rough.

**Analysis:** Here I failed to mention that my clients thinks that he's doing all right. I only restated that things are going rough for him. I probably could have said "So it seems that you feel that you're doing okay, but things are a little difficult for you at the moment.)

**Client:** Yeah, it's been, it's been kind of rough this, this semester's been tough. It's been a lot of work and I'm really nervous, I've been nervous lately about my grades. I'm not sure how I'm gonna, things are gonna pan out for me at the end of the semester.

**Therapist:** Oh so it sounds like, you know, it's been a long road and it's been difficult and now you're a little nervous about your grades coming up.

**Analysis:** I was trying to compare the rough semester to a long road. I mentioned that this road has been difficult because my client said that the semester was tough and I restated that he's nervous about his grades coming up.

**Client:** Yeah I'm really nervous, I'm, I know I'm gonna pass all my classes, I'm not worried about that, I'm not worried about getting kicked out or getting D's or anything, it's just, I

have such high expectations set as far as my grades go because I need these grades for my future (Therapist: Mhm) and, ya know, I'm flirting with with a B in one of my classes, I'm like right on the fence. Like my first couple grades were like B plus, A minuses and it really, it really scares me and like, like it so... I don't want to say scared, scared is not the right word, but I feel, I feel all nervous and like worried about my grades so I work ten times as hard and then I get my next paper back and it's the same grade I got on the first paper which I put no work or effort into. So then I question my ability and how I'm doing with things and then I say to myself well, the hell with it I might as well not even try and just wing it because I'm going to get the same grade.

**Therapist:** Yeah, so you're struggling right now with all the work you have and you're working so hard it seems like some of the work, where you're working so hard isn't paying off where when you're not working as hard as you normally were it's, (Client: yeah pretty much (Nodding)) your grades are coming easier to you (Client: Pretty much, yes).

**Analysis:** I should have mentioned that my client feels confident that he will pass all of his classes before I went on to his struggling issues. I should also have mentioned the high expectations my client has set for himself. A better response might have been "So it sounds as if you feel confident in your ability to pass, but your expectations are so high for yourself that you actually feel nervous when you receive an A- or a B. It also sounds like you don't see the point in working as hard as you do sometimes because you seem to end up doing better when you work less."

**Client:** It's tough for me, it's tough for me to, really to, to focus on anything else in my life but school and I know that, you know, I'm going to school full-time and taking four classes and that's it's a pretty big load. (Therapist: Mhm) But, I just have no time for anything else, it's like I'm always focusing on school because I'm worried about these grades, but then my personal life is becoming, you know, shit in plain English.

**Therapist:** Right. So it sounds like you want more of a personal life but you can't put aside all the school work you have in front of you, (Client: Yeah, that's pretty much what it is (Nodding)) that's on your plate.

**Analysis:** Here I was trying to restate what my client was saying. I should have mentioned his feelings more about being nervous and worried.

**Client:** And when I do try to like, you know, sustain some type of personal life or personal engagement, it's just, I don't feel as if I'm getting anything out of it because my mind is always on my school work. (Therapist: Mhm (Nods, Smiling)) I'm always thinking about, you know, all the stuff I have to do yet, and I'm not content until it's all done. (Therapist: Right (Still smiling)) But it seems like the last few months whenever it's been done there's been more on the plate to do, so I'm in, I'm in a no win situation right now.

**Therapist:** It's just always on your mind and you can't get rid of it, even when you want to have a relaxing time and relieve some stress it's still there, (Client: exactly) inside you.

**Analysis:** Here I was restating what my client just said. I was trying to show my client that I was actively listening and the smiling and nodding occurred because I could really understand where he was coming from and I think that my client felt that from my reactions.

**Client:** Then I'm thinking, like thinking about, you know, then sometimes I do think about the future and like all that I have to do, but next semester is going to be just as bad as this semester and I feel there's six months of my life kind of wasted because I have three classes, I'll be starting to write a thesis and I'll be doing like you know, like having four classes I have set times of being in classes and a set amount of homework. Like a thesis, there's so much literature out there I have to review and so much information and data I have to collect and analyze and you know. I know I have to do it though if I want to get into a good doctoral program, but I just wish that I could have some time off and to myself.

**Therapist:** Right, so it sounds like you know, you know you have to do what you have to do, but in another sense you feel like you're wasting part of your life because you're not doing the other things that are (Client: exactly (Nodding)) important.

**Analysis:** Here I could have mentioned the thesis in my response because that seems like a major issue that worries my client. I could have said something like "So it's almost as if the future worries you because you seem to be working so hard right now and you are so busy right now. But next semester you are worried that you will have so much more to do because of your thesis and if you can't get time to yourself now, how are you possibly supposed to get time to yourself then, or ever in the next six months."

**Client:** Exactly, I'm not, I have like no personal time to myself, but when I do have the time I'm always sitting there thinking about all the stuff I have to do.

**Therapist:** Mhm. I mean it sounds like you're striving really hard to get the things done so you can be where you want to be in a couple years and you're doing what you want to do.

**Analysis:** I did not mention anything that my client said, but I do not feel that my response was not helpful. I could have expanded a little more by saying something about him wanting more personal time without always focusing or being worried about his school- work.

**Client:** That's exactly it. I just don't know how to, I just don't know how to, I don't know what the right way to think about it is, I mean I go through these stages where I either think that I should stop and just sit back and just take a deep breath and let a week go by and not do anything, gather myself and move on. Other times I think that if I do that, I'm completely insane (Therapist: Mhm) because I have so much to do that I need to stay on top of it.

**Therapist:** So sometimes you can see a benefit of taking a week off and relaxing a little bit. (Client: Definitely (Nodding)) Then again, then you might get behind in what you need to get done.

**Analysis:** Here I just restated the two choices that my client had in front of him and the feelings he has toward both of these choices.

**Client:** I know I'll get behind. (Therapist: Right) And sometimes like it, it gets so bad that I just feel like I can't sleep or I wake up in the middle of the night at like three or four in the morning and just, like I, I had a dream last week about a presentation I had to give, I mean I reviewed the stuff like for eight hours straight on a Sunday about this presentation, I knew the inside and outside of Aristotle and John Locke like you can't believe, but yet I woke up and I

went to bed confident and I woke up and I was like so worried that from 4:00 am until 9:00 am I studied my, I studied my presentation.

**Therapist:** So it sounds like this is affecting all aspects of your life, even your sleep.

**Analysis:** Here I simply restated what my client had just said.

**Client:** It is (Nodding), it's affecting everything in my life, it's affecting my, everything my, even my relationships it's affected because I don't, like I said before I'm not getting any enjoyment out of anything, I'm, I'm just, I don't know (Shrugging).

**Therapist:** So it sounds like you want to find a way in order to have some kind of personal life that you can get enjoyment out of when you do have it, when it's there.

**Analysis:** I was trying to reflect what my client was saying here because he has made it clear that he would like to have some kind of personal life, but it seems like even when he does he can't have fun because he's always worried about school.

**Client:** I do, I also want a personal life that I can enjoy and have fun, but I, I don't think that's possible, I don't think that the goals I set for myself I can achieve if I do that. I mean, I'm an only child (Therapist: Mhm) from a, from only children parents so I'm an only grandchild and I'm under an enormous amount of pressure because since I was a kid it was pretty much set in stone that I either go to law school or I go to graduate school, I either go to law school or I get a Ph.D. And um, when I was in high school I wasn't trying to go to college, but at the last second I buckled and said you know, what the heck. So I applied to Kutztown and ah, actually the last day of late regi, late um admissions and I got accepted so I came here for my undergraduate and then I got an assistantship and an offer to come back so I came back, um, for my graduate degree. And when I did my undergrad I kind of screwed off in some of my classes, like I, I never really, for instance world history and world literature, I, I can give a rat's ass. (Therapist: Mhm (Smiling, nodding)) I want to study what I want to study, I know that it makes you a more well rounded person (Therapist: Mhm (Smiling)) and I got the main points of it, but I never really cared. (Therapist: Mhm (Nodding)) I just wanted to focus on psychology and social sciences, that's what interested me. And now that I'm in grad school I realize that I can't screw around anymore, I need to focus. So I realize that in order for me to get into a reputable ah doctoral program I need to get no less than like a 3.95. That means I can get one B in all my grad, in all my graduate work and it's something that I want to do because I want to have the notoriety or at least be able to get letters behind my name and I'm a doctor or something, and I know, you know, it opens a lot of different doors for you and makes things a little easier on you, once you achieve that, (Therapist: Mhm (Nodding)) but in the same respect I feel that I have to sacrifice and I've been sacrificing so much, (Therapist: Mhm (Nodding)) for the last few months that I don't know how I'm going to do it for another year and a half of this program and then I get out of this Master's program and then I move onto a doctoral program for like another three years, (Therapist: Mhm (Nodding)) full-time, I just don't know how I'm going to cut it putting off my life, I mean putting off marriage, I'm putting off, you know, a decent job, (Therapist: Mhm) everything that I want to do I'm not because I'm fitting this mold that's been created for me.

**Therapist:** So, you know, it's almost as if, you know, the expectations of your family has slowly but surely been incorporated within yourself and now you have a lot of high

expectations for yourself, um, you have goals, (Client: Mhm (Nodding)) you want to go after those goals, you have a lot of drive, but it's also taking away from the aspects of your life that you also want to have, like a family and marriage someday, and um, you're worried about how you're going to continue with this and when is that going to happen for you, (Client: Yes (Nodding)) when are you going to get there because you have all these other goals that will probably come before that.

**Analysis:** I failed to mention that my client feels he can't achieve his goals if he has a personal life and his struggle within himself of wanting one, but yet, thinking that it's not possible to have one. The reason why I mention that the expectations of my client's family has slowly but surely been incorporated within him is because he did not seem to hold these values in high regard during his undergraduate work and even less in high school and now it has grown tremendously in graduate school. I should have also mentioned that my client also seems apprehensive about school because he is only allowed to get one B in his entire Master's program. I mentioned marriage and family because it seems as if my client feels strongly about having both of these things someday and it does not seem as if he wants to wait, but in order to reach his goals and in the timeline he has set for himself, he has to wait.

**Client:** Exactly. I just, it just seems like the next, I mean I'll, I'll only be twenty-eight when I'll have my doctoral degree, I mean that that's pretty cool. (Therapist: Mhm) But, it's just like those five years seem so far away, but yet these last four months have gone so fast (Therapist: Mhm (Nod)) and like I have absolutely no time for anything, I'm, I've been at the gym two times in the last four months. (Therapist: Mhm (Smiling)) I used to go to the gym every freakin' day of the week (Client: Smiling) and I've been there two times in the last four months and the last, I've been there, It was this past Monday and this past Friday. That's it.

**Therapist:** So it sounds like, you know, you're looking forward to ah, getting your doctorate by the time you're twenty-eight, that would be a great sense of accomplishment for you, (Client: Definitely, yeah) at such a young age, (Client: Yeah) but it's taking away from your time now, (Client: Definitely) you know, when you're at this age and you want other things right now.

**Analysis:** I wanted to reiterate my clients feelings about getting his doctoral degree at the age of twenty-eight because I think that this is important to my client. I failed to mention the way my client feels about time and how the future seems so far away, yet the past has gone by so quickly for him. I nodded in agreement to the statement he made about time because I can understand what he means. I also wanted to show my client that I was actively listening and I smiled when he mentioned not having time to go to the gym because I can really understand that as well. I think that my client felt that I understood this and smiled back at me because of feeling understood.

**Client:** I do, I want other things. I mean I have tremendous support from my family. I mean my dad Is just I think, I think probably the greatest person on this earth, I mean he's, he has like the mentality like life goes on, nothing's a big deal, and if it is it will work itself out. I mean he's just the most supportive individual in the world and my mom's, my mom's pretty supportive too, she's, she's more of the ah, she's not as subtle as my dad, (Therapist: Mhm) she's more blunt and a little bit, I don't want to say more goal driven, but she's just, she has the mentality of doing things and moving on with life, (Therapist: Mhm (Smiling)) where my dad is, has the mentality of savoring the moment, savoring what you're doing, enjoying it and

like I've been thinking about that the last few months because I'm trying to enjoy graduate school, trying to enjoy my assistantship, and the fact that I have nothing to do all day, but you know, well you know, directing an office on campus and then focusing on graduate studies and I've learned probably more in the last four months than I learned in an entire undergraduate, you know, degree because I never cared about the undergraduate degree, (Therapist: Mhm) I never had time to focus on anything. (Therapist: Mhm) But, in the same respect, sometimes I feel as if I'm almost doing the things and achieving the things that I supposedly want to achieve because my parents want me to achieve that. (Therapist: Mhm) And that's kind of hard.

**Therapist:** So it sounds like you admire your dad a great deal and um, the values that he holds, you know, you admire those too and you're trying to do what um, you're trying to instill the values he has in yourself and enjoy life, but at the same time maybe you feel like you're not doing all this for yourself.

**Analysis:** I smiled at my client when he mentioned his father's mentality because I can understand that. My client seemed very proud of his father's mentality and seemed to have great respect for his values so I mentioned this in my response. I also mentioned that my client seems to be trying to instill these values within himself because he mentioned that even though he has so much to do he is trying to enjoy it as much as he can because he seems to realize that every day only comes once. I also restated my clients feelings at times about going through graduate school for his family more than for himself.

**Client:** I feel like that a lot. I feel like I'm doing it for, sometimes for my, I don't know, I don't know what I'm doing it for anymore, I really don't. I mean I know what I want to be in my life and I know what I want to be when I grow up, but sometimes I'm just not sure that I'm, pay paying the price is the right way to do it. I mean, a lot of people work when they go to grad school and they like, you know, they take one or two classes and they work full-time and they have somewhat of a, I don't want to say stability because I'm stable in my life, but they have a job, (Therapist: Mhm) and they have co-workers and, you know, that they make friends with and, and what not, and they can focus on more than one thing, they don't have that big of a graduate load so they can, you know, take a breather, take it easy. Not that I'm saying taking four classes is harder than working and taking two classes, but taking four classes is a, is a lot of work.

**Therapist:** Right, so it sounds like you're kind of struggling like maybe you want to go in that direction, but then again you want to accomplish what you want to accomplish in five years, but you can see the benefit to both worlds.

**Analysis:** Here I was trying to reflect my understanding of what my client was saying. I felt that my client was struggling sometimes with what he really wants to be doing. He has mentioned through out this session that sometimes he feels like he is going to graduate for his family more than he is doing it for himself. For this reason I thought that it was important to reflect the struggle he may be having now with the way he wants to go to graduate school meaning full-time versus part-time.

**Client:** Exactly, I can. (Client: Nodding) And sometimes I kick myself in the ass because I feel like that not working is a, um, well I worked in my undergraduate degree, I mean a lot of the stuff came really easy to me and I, you know, I worked with kid's and stuff and I, I

enjoyed working and um, I took a semester off before grad school and I worked full-time and I don't know coming back to grad school is just, it's a little bit of a different world, it's, I just have to do stuff, (Therapist: Mhm) you know, and it, undergraduate degree and high school I mean, I didn't do, I didn't have to do a damn thing to get by. I mean I could just go to classes and not read anything and take a test and get an A or B on it, it was just cake, and grad school's not like that.

**Therapist:** Uh huh, so you have a lot more responsibilities now.

**Analysis:** Because my client did not finish a lot of his statements at first and was jumping around I could not get the gist of exactly what he was saying. I'm sure that he was saying more than that he had a lot more responsibilities now than he had in the past, but that was the only solid thing I could get out of it so I went with that.

**Client:** Right and I think that's part of my problem too, I mean, I'm kind of fearful that, I mean I know I can cut it here because I know I can cut it in any Master's program, I know I can make the grades for the most part, but getting by and getting by so I can get into a reputable doctoral program is two completely different things. I don't want to go to like an IUP for my doctorate degree, I want to go to, you know someplace that is ranked in the top ten or top fifteen like in the country. And um.

**Therapist:** So it sounds like you have confidence in your abilities to get through your Master's program, you're just a little worried about, mm, you just have higher expectations than just getting by. (Therapist: Non-verbal facial expression shows that I wasn't comfortable with what I just said and I was trying to find the right words.)

**Analysis:** I would have let my client continue, however he seemed to be done after saying um. I could tell that he wasn't thinking of more to say he was more interested in what I wanted to say about the situation. I restated my clients confidence in getting through the Master's program. I was about to go into what he was worried about, but I wasn't comfortable with the way I was going about it so I changed what I was saying to his higher expectations than just getting through it. I should have mentioned what exactly these higher expectations were, such as doing so well that he would be able to get into a top university in the country.

**Client:** Exactly. And that's another problem that I think I have too is that a lot of people I meet in here, you know in grad school is, their mentality is just do enough so that they can get by, it's not a big deal what I get, as long as I can get by and that's not my mentality so then I think sometimes that, you know, I'm doing myself a disservice of being here because I'm around other individuals or my peers who don't really care. I mean, they care don't get me wrong, but they don't care to, to over-excel, over-achieve they (Therapist: Uh huh) just choose to be complacent and an A or B is fine with them.

**Therapist:** So you don't share a certain commonality there with a lot of your peers who (Client: Exactly) are trying to get through grad school as well. (Client: Exactly) They just want the degree and want to move on and you (Client: I want the degree more than of the degree) Right.

**Analysis:** My client is now struggling with what he feels is a significant difference between himself and his peers in his program. I restated what he was saying about this in different words. I also decided to state the difference that he feels exist and he finished what I was saying. I should have mentioned that my client felt that he was doing himself a disservice of being where he is, but I think that my client was eager to move on with what he was saying.

**Client:** I don't know. Maybe I'm making a bigger deal out of this than I really should be. I'm not sure. All I know is my life has been kind of like, I wouldn't say in shambles, but you know like I've been thinking about this a lot lately.

**Therapist:** Mhm, and you think that you're thinking about it too much.

**Analysis:** My client just said that he has been thinking about his life a lot, I decided to move slightly ahead with this and reflect my understanding that he thinks he is thinking about his life too much.

**Client:** Yeah, I think I've been a little bit obsessive with it.

**Therapist:** Worrying about it too much.

**Analysis:** Here I was trying to restate what my client had just said in different words.

**Client:** Definitely.

**Therapist:** And you're struggling with that.

**Analysis:** My client confirmed my last statement that he feels he is worrying too much about his life, so I thought I would move on and clarify that my client is struggling with this worry that he has.

**Client:** Yeah, a lot. I'll be like reading something for one of my classes and I'm just thinking like is it, am I doing the right thing here, am I studying the right area, am I in the right program, and am I going to achieve what I want to. It just seems like I'm so fixated on the future that I'm missing out on what's happening now.

**Therapist:** And that worries you because....

**Analysis:** Before I could finish what I wanted to say my client had more that he wanted to say so I let him continue because I thought that it was more important for him to get whatever he wanted out that for me to respond at this point.

**Client:** Because I don't want to be seventy-five and realize that I missed seven years of my life because I went to mast, to, to, you know, graduate school, but then I'll have a doctoral degree and then I start my life. (Therapist: Mhm) I mean, after I get my doctoral degree I'll just, I'm gonna get married and probably start having kids and build a house and, but I'm not going to have that twenty-two to twenty-seven period where everybody else had to basically screw off and (Therapist: Right) you know, explore the world.

**Therapist:** So you're going to go from one major responsibility to the next (Client: Right) without that time in between to be young (Client: Yup (Nodding)) and responsibility free, (Client: Yup) and that worries you too.

**Analysis:** Here I was simply restating what my client said in different words.

**Client:** Yup. (C: Nodding)

**Therapist:** All right, well it was nice talking to you Steve. (Therapist: Smiling)

**Analysis:** Here I was trying to end the session slowly and politely.

**Client:** Is our time up already? (Client: Checking watch)

**Therapist:** Yes, it is. (Therapist: Smiling)

**Client:** All right, see you next week.

**Therapist:** Okay.

## **Policy Statement**

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