

EMPATHY EXPERIMENT REPORT: A MOTHER AND A FRIEND

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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.

Responding empathetically has proven to be both a unique and educational experience during the course of this exercise. After quite some consideration, I decided to choose a family member, my mother, and a friend to test the reactions and results of my empathetic responses. The first participant was my friend. I usually address her as "Steele." She is a long-time college friend who has a bolstering sense of humor. She resides relatively close to me and enjoys spending time with her friends on the weekends. We are of the same age and have many of the same interests. She and I were both college athletes and have endured and shared many of the same memories that result from this experience. The second participant was my mother. She is a 53 year-old mother of four, grandmother to two, owns and runs a business, and a household. She is a strong-willed, stubborn Italian woman, and at the same time she is very nurturing and caring. She has always been moving and going at 115 miles per hour since I can remember. She has never missed a single event in any of her children or grandchildren's lives, but sometimes she pays the price and can become very frustrated and angry. Naturally, I felt she could benefit from some empathetic understanding. Neither participant was informed of this exercise, as I thought it would be more meaningful for all parties involved. I do, however feel that my mother began to become aware of what I was attempting to do.

My relationship with Steele is quite unique. As I have stated before, we have many of the same interests and have shared many experiences together. Nevertheless I have not shared in the hardships that she has experienced recently. There are a few yet serious expectations in our relationship: be honest, truthful, a good friend, and most importantly "

call me on Thursday to let me know what the plans are for the weekend ”. We value similar things in life like family, friends, school, and a successful career. There are a few cultural differences between Steelie and myself even so I did not allow these differences to interfere.

The relationship with my mother is also quite exceptional. She has and continues to be an excellent role model, but has a short fuse and fairly rarely finds the time to release her feelings of frustration and emotional trepidation. We have the traditional mother-daughter expectations in our relationship. I do not live in the same house any longer, which recently has changed the nature of our relationship, but I do visit frequently during the week and on the weekends. We share many of the same values and beliefs, and when mine are different and separate from hers, I am likely to keep them to myself to avoid conflict.

I do consider both of my attempts at responding empathetically to be a positive, valuable, and successful experience, although I do consider my experience with Steelie to be more significant. I can describe my encounter with her as a learning experience that I will never forget. Steelie normally spent time at my apartment, as do some of my other friends. She decided to visit after dinner one evening, stating on the phone that she wanted to speak with me about something very important. I agreed and wondered what was so urgent. She arrived and was visibly very upset and shaken. She said she wanted to speak with me about her parents because I have had experience working with people and children whose parents have been divorced. She was completely unaware that her parents were unhappy and after 20 years of marriage decided that their relationship was finished. Initially I was uncomfortable discussing this with her. I was not resistant to the point where she became uncomfortable, however I felt this was something she should be discussing with other members of her family. She began to become more self-disclosing as I became more empathetic. She simply wanted someone to listen, not to provide suggestions as to how she should feel. That in itself was the most difficult thing to do since during the course of our friendship we have both been comfortable giving advice and suggestions to one another.

We would speak about this topic at least once or twice a week and it was usually at her request. We often spoke in private at my apartment or at her home. The more private the environment, the more relaxed she became, which allowed her to convey more deeper and painful feelings. As I began to become more accurate and empathetic with my responses she would reveal an enormous amount of resentment towards her mother. Eventually she even disclosed that her mother re-married immediately after the divorce and informed her via a card in the mail. At this point, I experienced some difficulty remaining objective because I have a pleasant relationship with my mother and feel that she is an important figure in my life. Steelie wanted desperately to simply remove her mother from her life altogether. Here, I felt the nature of our friendship attempt to take over and I found it difficult to agree with her decision. I was however, able to display my disagreement and demonstrate my acceptance of her reasoning. Eventually she was able to organize her feelings through our weekly conversations.

Shortly after Steelie approached me regarding the familial issue, she was also hit with some more devastating news. A previous high school / college boyfriend had made a decision to voluntarily end his life. Her biggest concern now was that she was to blame because she had not spent as much time with him as in the past and was not as friendly as in previous times. Above all, Steelie genuinely felt emotions that she felt scared to feel. Again, we met at her convenience and normally at a private place. We often discussed her feelings

towards him; how she felt in the past as compared to how she feels now. When I chose to ask a question, which was the only one I needed to ask, I asked why. I was informed that he battled several mental health problems and his medications were to blame.

During this experience she was very expressive and it was originally difficult to reflect her feelings. After a few meetings, I began to notice that she would make statements with respect to her feelings regarding my empathetic responses. She stated that she just simply felt comfortable and never felt judged while she was talking. Most importantly she stated that I never made her feel bad or wrong about any of the feelings she felt with to her family or towards a good friend. She also noted that she was able to actually hear what she was saying after I had made my empathetic response. She was finally able to feel certain emotions that before she felt afraid to experience by herself. My goal was to understand her emotions *as if* I were feeling the exact same pain, confusion, and loss that she was feeling. Once I was able to do this thoroughly, my ability to remain objective did not seem as difficult to express. I feel and believe that responding empathetically has worked for Steelie in both situations.

The experience with my mother was just as challenging. I felt that when my mother suffered feelings of frustration and anger, this would be a particularly beneficial time to respond empathetically. I found that when my responses were made during or while her levels of frustration were increasing, she was less likely to accept or tolerate my response. Some examples of her retorts were: "stop patronizing me", "are you trying to diagnosis me with something", or "don't use that crap on me, I am not having a problem", and my personal favorite "stop that psychoanalyzing bull...". I was hoping that by providing my mother with empathy that I would be able to show her that I could or was able to understand, or at the very least, making an attempt to understand.

I found that when my responses appeared before her escalating temper or after she had the opportunity to calm down, she was less likely to tell me to stop or to respond at all. Sometimes when she chose not to respond to my reflection or restatement, I began to see a sense of appreciation. It seemed as though she valued the silence. My mother often has these types of angry outbursts and most of the time when I attempted to make an empathetic response it was not in a private environment. The presence of other family members made it difficult, at times, for her to hear and process what I had said. The fact that other people were in the room could have also made her feel uncomfortable and it was certainly less effective. I could sense a trace of anxiousness in myself when I was alone with my mother, wanting badly to capitalize on this opportunity. My goal was not to reduce the increasing levels of frustration; I essentially wanted her to feel understood. I also wanted to improve our relationship in some way; perhaps this was a self-serving goal that affected my response and the results. I could also sense that my mother appreciated when I acted more like a daughter than like a counselor. It was evident though that sometimes she treasured my understanding more often when we were alone.

Neither participant was informed of this exercise taking place. I was fearful that if I allowed either to be aware of what was going on it would have negatively impacted the outcome. I could have approached my mother and seriously contemplated the idea of doing so. In my experience with Steelie I was unsure of her level of emotional instability and thought it would be grossly inappropriate to mention this especially considering the circumstances. Both experiences were very testing and demanding at times to remain

objective. I had different expectations for both participants, but tried equally throughout to be empathetic and genuine. A level of trust and comfortability was previously established during my lifetime with my mother and through my experiences with Steelie. I believe this permitted both participants to increase their levels of responsiveness and I feel that this also played an integral role in my ability to respond empathetically.

Steelie was more talkative at times and withdrawn at others, as was my mother, which allowed me to contribute more empathetic responses. The topics that were discussed with Steelie ranged from familial stressors to death and bereavement. Discussion with my mother often dealt with work, money, cooking, cleaning, and midlife concerns. When I would detect that I was becoming frustrated or disappointed with my response I would evaluate things appropriately and make another attempt.

Throughout this exercise I was able to assess and examine my inaccuracies and mistakes. I was also able to learn how to take advantage of my strengths. I feel that this in itself was very beneficial and a positive consequence that I would not have necessarily been able to investigate without having the opportunity to participate in this exercise. I also learned and discovered that during very emotional, painful, and personal conditions, I was able to respond empathetically without letting my own beliefs, values, and relationship with both participants prove to be an obstacle that I could not overcome. It was obvious in both situations that privacy and a comfortable environment was essential to both participants involved when disclosing personal information. The benefits to both participants were also very significant. For instance, in my experience with Steelie, genuineness and empathy were very helpful, as she simply wanted someone to listen and not to tell her how or what to feel. Empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard were also utilized respectfully with my mother to make obvious to her that I respected all that she has done for her family, regardless of how or what she was feeling at that moment.

The negative consequences or limitations of being empathetic were not as easy to distinguish. It is quite possible that Steelie and my mother will both expect these behaviors and reactions from me all of the time. I am not concerned that I have set a precedent or a standard, however the expectations in our relationships may now be different because of my decision to respond empathetically. The negative consequences that affected me during this exercise were mostly internal limitations that I set for myself. For example, when I was not able to respond empathetically to my mother, because of the frequency with which her frustrations would increase, I would become less hopeful that my responses would be effective and supportive.

My ability to respond empathetically was affected by variables such as the participants' response. If the participant was able to somehow react in a positive manner, verbally or nonverbally, I was more likely to be empathetic. It was also difficult to respond empathetically when my mother was resistant or reluctant to accept my restatement or reflection. Her anger seemed to affect this exercise the most. The amount of time or opportunities that I had to be empathetic with her was also a factor. Empathy was not difficult to communicate in my experience with "Steelie", however her emotional instability was at times hard to monitor. This directly affected my ability to respond empathetically. Once my experiences with my mother and with Steelie became more consistent and more structured, the variables of anger, emotional instability, and time began to fade and did not affect my ability to respond as frequently.

The variables that I considered to be most facilitative in nature during this exercise were largely my genuine desire to help both participants. In the situation with Steelie I seriously tried to see and understand her pain and loss as she did. After I was able to envision her situation from her perspective and frame of reference, to the best of my ability, my empathetic responses seemed more simple to provide. I also noticed that "Steelie" became more responsive and felt safer to disclose when my empathetic responses were truthful and honest. My ability to remain objective and listen during my experience with Steelie was also very important. During the experience with my mother, I was able to use our shared history to my advantage and at the same time was able to remain objective and non-judgmental. In the beginning I felt myself making more safe and more simple statements towards my mother. I was apprehensive to interact with her in this way. I also observed a noticeable improvement when my mother and I had the opportunity to spend time together privately. The amount of affection and respect that I have for my mother made it easier to respond empathetically.

Again, throughout this exercise I was able to analyze and dissect my abilities as a counselor. I believe that both experiences were positive ones and also served as a learning experience of what I may see in the future. I was initially resistant to engage in this exercise because this is not how I normally interact with my family and friends. I was also concerned that because I do not ordinarily interact like this that the two participants would realize that I was doing something different and then avoid me altogether. As a whole I certainly consider this exercise to be a very valuable one, as it enabled me to evaluate my ability to respond empathetically in two very different situations.

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