

AUDIO TAPE PRACTICE IN EMPATHY

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This presentation of a semester-long counselor-client relationship between the author and his 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: How are you doing, Kate? How have you been since the last time we saw each other. (5-second pause).

Client: Well last time we were talking about how I am overwhelmed with everything here and it is starting to feel a little bit like, it still feels like it is overwhelming because we are further into the semester where there is a lot of working that is coming up that is due (**Therapist:** Right) but I feel like when I sit back and look at it, especially when it is all over I am not feeling that bad I am okay, I am making it, it is not as different as I thought it was going to be from undergrad. It is not that much harder so I am not feeling as overwhelmed as I was before. It is kinda of sinking in that it is something I can do and I feel I am ready for this. I think I will be okay.

Therapist: It sounds like you have put things in perspective and you realize that you are making accomplishments and you are being successful at being in graduate school.

Analysis: The client was saying a lot and I wanted to offer a response that encompassed all of her message. I listened to what she was saying and at the same time thought about her message while thinking of an empathic response to offer. This has gotten a little easier as I have done more practices sessions, but it is still somewhat difficult for me to be truly attentive while thinking of an empathic response. My response was a primary empathic response that tried to put myself in the client's position and relate how it would be to experience what she is experiencing. It was an effective response and I feel that I was able to assist the client in addressing the issue of her feeling of being overwhelmed. She was expressing that she did feel better after putting things in perspective and I tried to point that out to her. An alternate response would have been similar to the one I gave and would have been: It sounds like you

are realizing that you are able to meet all of the requirements of graduate school and succeed at the same time.

Client: Yes that's true. I have. I have to think of this in perspective. I have to think before I looked at graduate school as something that was, I just looked at it as this hard task that I had to accomplish and now that I am actually here and getting into the swing of things and starting to understand more about it. You are right it doesn't seem as hard when you put it in perspective.

Therapist: Maybe before graduate school was an unknown and that made it scary and now that you've experienced it is not as bad as you thought it would be.

Analysis: I was following along closely with what the client was saying and realized that she was speaking as if she had been scared of graduate school because it was something new and unfamiliar. I wanted to relay this to her and did so with my response. It was a primary empathic response in that I described the readily apparent situation that the client was speaking about. I used different language than the client had used, but said basically the same thing. It was an effective response as evidenced by the fact that the client responded "exactly". As in previous practice sessions with this client it made me feel good to know that I was "with" the client and that I was responding with replies that were matching the intended message of the client. An alternate response would not be necessary in this case.

Client: Exactly, yea. (11-second pause) But there is actually something else that I was thinking about that has nothing to do with school.

Therapist: Okay, that's fine. (7-second pause)

Analysis: The client wanted to talk about another issue as evidenced by her statement, but it was her pause and facial expressions that clued me in to the fact that she was collecting her thoughts. I was rather sure that her pauses did not indicate that she was embarrassed or reluctant to speak about this new topic, so I simply offered an acceptance response. The purpose of this response was to convey to the client that I had heard what she said and that I would give her time to decide how to bring up this new issue. I also allowed the silence to continue until she broke it when she spoke again. An equally effective alternate response might have been: "Sure, that's okay."

Client: It has been kinda hard for me the last couple weeks how can I say this, my, I've, the girls that I keep in touch with from college, uh, we all really get along. We all really get along and there is a group of about 10 of us that we constantly talk on e-mail and that is how we all keep in touch but most of them are within 20 minutes of each other in, like, the Phila. area and I am kinda one of the only ones farther away, most of them are either in Phila. or right over the bridge in N.J., so I feel like I am missing out on a lot with them because they are together every weekend and between schoolwork and spending time with my family and spending time with my boyfriend it is not, it is not, I can't be with them every weekend and sometimes I wish I could be with them every weekend but I can't. And it is kinda frustrating, it is not frustrating, it is just kinda of I feel a little bit left out when I see all the e-mails about something they were doing and I didn't get to do with them.

Therapist: It sounds like you are geographically separated and that makes you think that your relationships are suffering with these people that you used to be close with.

Analysis: This is another situation where the client offered a lot of information quite quickly. Because I had already made a few good responses that I felt comfortable with, I was more confident with myself and attempted to offer an advanced empathic response. I listened as the client spoke and decided that she sounded as if she was afraid that living apart from her friends was harming her relationships with them. My advanced empathic response stated what the client had implied but had not come right out and said. I was an effective response and the client agreed with my reaction. She continued to open up and discuss her feelings about the relationships she has with her close friends.

Client: Yea, yea, exactly because once we are together we are fine. Nothing is awkward, I don't feel like we are not as close as we used to be but being far away doesn't let me spend as much time as I used to. I am used to living, 5 of us lived above the 5 others. We all just kinda of were always around each other, even if it wasn't my roommates or my apartment or the girl from downstairs we would all be together. And like our other friends would all meet where we were so just always being around everybody, you never miss out on anything you always knew what was going on. You always got to spend time with them but now that I am here and they are there and it is just. You have to plan when you are going to see them and when you are going to spend time with them. It is not you just going to walk over to their apartment and knock on the door and they are there. I have to set aside a weekend where I am going to go down to Philly and spend a weekend there so I can get to see all my friends. Even when I do set aside a weekend there might only be 6 or 7 of everyone there and I don't get to see some of the people so one of the girls that I was closest with in college I haven't seen for almost a month because it didn't work out because every time I was there she wasn't.

Therapist: It almost sounds like this does tie in with the other issue we were talking about before. Before you felt graduate school was keeping you back from experiencing life and now it sounds like you feel it is keeping you back from enjoying your friendships that you used to have.

Analysis: I listened to the client speak and began to make the connection that this new issue that she had brought up was very similar to the previous issue we had discussed in the past. We had discussed how she felt that because she was in graduate school she was missing out on getting a job and having that experience. I realized that this issue was very similar in that she felt that graduate school was affecting her life in so many ways. I offered an advanced empathic response by pulling these themes together and stating them for the client to hear. She had already brought up these issues on her own; I just reworded them and suggested that they were actually connected.

Client: yea it is, it is. Because if I could have gone to graduate school near all my friends I would in a heartbeat. But I can't afford it. I am lucky I have a job here and so that I don't have to pay for the tuition. So I can never cut that down because I have enough loans to worry about from undergrad. Yea, being here and being in graduate school is kinda like, it's kinda like this is the time of my life I always figured, like, when I graduated from college I would be, like, I know I want to get married and have a family but I always figured that after college those 2 or 3 years I could spend working and having fun with my friends and just doing whatever and then settle down. But now it is just all my friends are in that stage where they

are having fun and I am still working hard. Like they are working hard in their jobs. (**Therapist:** Right.) They are still all together hanging out and doing fun things together. I'm working hard, still in school, and by the time I am done school they're all going to be to the point where they are done all that fun stuff and they are ready to settle down and I am going to be to the point where I miss out on all that time.

Therapist: It seems like you feel you are missing out even though you know it's the right thing to do. You feel almost like you are being left behind.

Analysis: The client was expressing her fears that she was missing out on the fun that her friends were having. I instinctually wanted to comfort the client because she was sounding a bit distressed about the ramifications of her choice to attend graduate school. Because I did not want to overstep any boundaries, I decided to simply offer a primary empathic response while adding the element of "even though you know it's the right thing to do" which the client had brought up in previous sessions. The response was really just relaying back to the client her exact intended message. An alternate response would have been an advanced empathic one. It would have been something like: You sound like you are worried that your choice to attend graduate school might have been a mistake on some level because of the unintended damage you feel it is doing to your friendships. Of course it is not possible to know if this message could have been considered an empathic one because it may have been off base. It is only empathic if I am responding to the client's intended message. Because I was feeling as if I might start trying to directly console the client, I felt safer sticking with a response that I was more comfortable giving.

Client: It is almost like school is holding me back. It is holding me back from spending time with my friends and just having fun. Its um, its like I know it is going to give me a better future but in the present it is just like sometimes I think what's the right thing to do , I know that deep down inside I am happy that I did this because in the long run once everybody stopped going out to bars all the time and hanging out every weekend I am going to be happy that I have good job and I can support myself and stuff like that. But I just right now, I feel I am young I just should be out there having fun and just enjoy life and I am to an extent, but I feel that because I am an hour away from everyone I just can't go out to dinner with everybody in the middle of the week. By the time I get there they are already having dinner for an hour so it is just kinda. (5-second pause).

Therapist: So it sounds like you lost that spontaneity that you had with your friends. The little things that seem to mean so much and even when you plan the trips down there, it is not the same feeling when you were all together.

Analysis: At this point I was feeling less of a need to console the client and was back on track with focusing on her intended message. As she spoke I felt that she was saying that even when she does plan trips to see her friends it is different because the spontaneity was gone. I used that term when I offered my response. It was a primary empathic response that responded to what it would have felt to experience what the client was experiencing. It was effective and the client's nonverbal cues allowed me to reach the conclusion that I understood her intended message. These nonverbal cues included facial expression, head nodding and eye contact.

Client: Yea, it is not. I am sure they feel the same way too because they are not together all the time. They're not together all the time they are just together more than I am. I know like two weekends ago I went with a bunch of my friends to visit one of the girls that moved away. I wanted to go because I know that she was probably thinking the same thing that I am ,she is away from everybody and she misses being around everybody so I wanted to go because I wanted to be there for her because I know she is probably going through the same stuff that I am. We had a blast. She lives right outside New York City. So we went in the City and it was just so much fun being around everybody. The next day we all got up and just sat around in our pajamas, and talked for like 2 hours. It was just, it was fun to be back with them and just hang out and relax and have fun.

Therapist: Were you able to talk to the other girl that moved away to see if she is feeling the same way you are?

Analysis: I decided to ask a question here to determine if the client had discussed her situation with a friend that was going through the same type of thing. I was thinking that if she had been able to discuss their situations together it might have helped my client. While a question is leading, I felt that the information that asking it would provide would be beneficial to the session. An alternate response would have been: It sounds as if you realize that your friends' lives have also changed from when you were all in college together. This response would have incorporated the client's message that she realizes that her friends aren't together all of the time and that another friend has also moved away and has a different life situation at this time.

Client: Yea, I talked to her about it before. She feels the same way. It is really hard for her because she is about an hour and half, I think, away from everyone. So she feels the same way that it is harder because you can't be at everything and my friends are together every weekend and they have something planned every weekend, both nights. Well in reality I can't make it every weekend but it is nice. My boyfriend isn't going to want me to go out with the girls every weekend by myself. But it feels better to know that I am not the only one but she is going through the same kinda of thing.

Therapist: So it sounds like you feel better after talking with your friend that is in the same situation as you, you are reassured that what you are feeling is normal.

Analysis: I was thinking that I was glad that I asked the question that I had because it had prompted the client to share her experience she had talking with her friend. It had been a positive experience and it was worthwhile for her to discuss it during the session. It seemed to me that she was feeling better about her situation after talking more about it. This was evidenced by her facial expressions and tone of voice. My response was a primary empathic one that incorporated the client's message that she felt better after discussing with her friend their common experience of being away from their group of friends.

Client: Yeah exactly, (13 second pause) Uhm, Another thing that is kinda of hard I feel like I am not going through things normally. Like a few years after college you should be young and do whatever. I feel like when I am actually done grad school. It is going to be, um. Like my boyfriend we have been together 3 years. As of now we plan on staying together. I think it is unfair of me to have him wait for me to be ready to move on in our relationship for the whole 3 years that I am in grad school. And then another a couple years that I am out of grad

school I will be on my own and I know that eventually I want to be with him so it is kinda of hard to give up that part of being on your own and just go right from this to having a family.

Therapist: So it sounds like being in grad school effects a lot of things like what we talked about before, like not having a job like your friends do, not getting to see your friends, and now it seems you feel like you are also holding your boyfriend back from the life that you are going to have later on.

Analysis: I was thinking that much of what the client feels as overwhelming is a direct result of being in grad school. I wanted to offer a response that recognized all of the different areas of her life that she felt overwhelmed in. I pulled together what we had discussed during this session and during previous sessions. My response was a primary empathic one that expressed what it would be like to experience what the client has. It was an effective response that resulted in the client opening up about how she was feeling about her relationship with her boyfriend which had really been discuss before in this or previous sessions.

Client: Yea, I feel bad about it sometimes because he is so supportive and I know that if he could he would probably me rather not be in grad school but he knows that this is what I want to do and I am going to be happier with this job I have after school than I was before but it is hard for him because he is a year older than me. He has been out of school for a year before I have. So another 3 years while I am here. He just kinda waits for me almost. I know it is hard for me but it is probably harder for him. I feel bad about that. I feel like me doing this is really just about me. This is what I want and it is somewhat selfish because I am saying I want this kind of job when I am done. I feel like it is affecting so many different relationships all for me to have what I want. I know I should have a life that I want but it is effecting so many other people that I didn't realize. It is affecting my relationship with my friends, my boyfriend, and my family. Everything.

Therapist: It seems that you are very concerned with being fair to the people in your life while you are in grad school and that it is very difficult to do what feels like putting your needs first. (5-second pause). We are about out of time. Is there anything else you want to say?

Analysis: I again felt that what the client was talking about was one big issue involving grad school and the client's guilt in doing what she thinks is right for her. I didn't want to come right out and state that I felt she was feeling guilty, because I wasn't positive this was the case. Instead I responded with a more conservative response that still brought up that the client wants to be fair to those in her life while at the same time addressing her wants and needs by attending grad school. This was a primary empathic response.

Client: No it feels better to talk about it. It feels good to talk about it and let out what you want to say

Therapist: I am glad I could help.

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