

Teaching and Learning Empathy

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Dimensions of Empathic Therapy

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An Overview

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Empathy is rarely taught in graduate and professional schools. Perhaps it is assumed that aspiring therapists and human service providers will absorb empathy from modeling their professors and supervisors. Needless to say, this is too often not the case. Instead, empathy may be discouraged and even stifled during the educational and professional experience.

Empathy is often learned outside of formal training. It may be experienced with loving family members, significant mentors, teachers, spiritual leaders, and other role models in their lives. Sometimes the responses of patients and clients alert young professionals to their lack of empathy or to the value of the empathy that they do express.

Based on our belief that empathy is essential to good professional practice, we have chosen to explore and present empathy from a variety of perspectives. We have brought together an interdisciplinary mix of the authors as professors, practitioners, center directors, and clinicians, some of whom are nationally and internationally recognized leaders in their fields. It is striking that they come from a range of mental health disciplines including psychiatry, counseling, psychology, and social work.

This book addresses empathy within the scope of clinical practice with diverse approaches that include working within unique therapeutic treatment milieus; treating children, adolescents, the elderly, and families; and providing empathy within the framework of established intervention models. Various themes are also explored such as the interrelationship of empathy with love, self-awareness, and self-transformation, as well as the use of specific techniques, such as writing, to foster empathy. The book further delves into empathy as a cornerstone of personal life and professional practice with stories, reflections, and personal journeys. Empathy is explored and discussed within the framework of culture and cultural differences. Finally there are examples of how empathy has been introduced to professionals within a graduate level training curriculum.

Tracing empathy back to the roots of our training can provide an interesting perspective about the continuum of our growth and development. Several graduate students in the counseling program at George Mason University were interviewed about their experiences in learning about empathy during their training. Their comments are poignant and provide insight into how the process can begin for budding professionals. One student, Kerry Pelletier, spoke about how she was inundated with theories and techniques as a student and intern. She commented, "I truly feel that my ability to work through all of my questions and concerns is directly related to the support of fellow students, professors, and my on-site supervisors. . . . I have been encouraged, supported and validated." Interestingly, Kerry translates this information into understanding empathy. "What I am realizing is how truly invaluable empathy is for a client." Another student, Josephine Selepak, feels as if she has "stumbled upon empathy several times during [my] graduate education." She portrays the value of empathy with a wonderful metaphor. "Sometimes I feel like I am out to sea on a raft by myself. Whenever someone reaches out to me in empathy, there are more people on the raft with me, the shore is much closer." Jacqueline Naughton, another student who worked with children with emotional disabilities for 8 years, echoes the views of her peers. She comments, "I have been given the gift of numerous professors who are not just knowledgeable and experienced, but truly understanding and empathetic to the roller coaster of emotions and thoughts that accompany the field of counseling." Jackie believes that like "teachable moments" there are "empathetic moments" that can "make or break" graduate students. Finally, Charles D. Smith, a 48- year-old graduate student with 22 years experience as a teacher, struggled with early classes that were contradictory to his teaching background, found the empathy of a professor pulled him through his frustration as a new student. He discovered how empathy from faculty and his peers helped him grow, develop, and "touched his soul and lifted his spirit." These testimonies are merely a sample of the power of empathy early on in training and provide a foundation for future professionals.

Within the diverse collection of authors and multiple perspectives, a core theme resonates throughout this book. It resounds through examinations of training, practice, treatment, culture, and one's own self journey. The theme is this: Empathy remains at the heart of therapeutic life and is important throughout one's professional life.

Professional training should incorporate a more systematic and conscious approach to promoting the students natural empathy. Students can be encouraged to trust the importance of empathy in

psychotherapy and to remain aware of their own life's journey and its impact on their capacity to care for and to understand other human beings. At all levels of professional development and practice, empathy should be woven into the other important facets of psychotherapy and human services.

Unfortunately, formal mental health education usually tends to impede and even to crush the student's natural, intuitive empathy for patients and clients. When counselors, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists and other professionals are taught to rely upon the latest edition of American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, they are pressured to fit everyone into these cookie-cutter labels. Forcing the life stories of individual patients to conform to these abstract diagnoses tends to discourage empathy and to encourage emotional distance. The client becomes a diagnostic label rather than a struggling human being in need of empathy and guidance.

Similarly, when health professionals are taught to rely on the prescription of psychoactive drugs, they are in effect instructed in how to suppress the emotional lives of their patients and clients. Instead of welcoming intense feelings in an empathic manner, they are encouraged to view intense feelings as dangerous and or alien in need of medical suppression.

In psychiatry, for example, students are sometimes taught "You can't talk to schizophrenia." The young doctor is discouraged from even trying to understand the patient's suffering and conflicts. Manipulation of the patient as an object becomes the only approved approach.

Understanding empathy usually begins with subjective self-understanding about our own emotions and needs. Yet one of the beauties of empathy is that it is universal. Empathy transcends culture, professional disciplines, religions, environments, and chronological and developmental age. It can happen at any time in any place. It can produce treasured experiences that are valued for a lifetime and can help individuals break through and resolve serious psychological difficulties that confront them during the course of their lives.

The development of empathy is a lifetime work. It is never finished; it requires renewed inspiration as we are challenged by new experiences in every aspect of our lives. We hope our book will assist you in this never-ending path of personal and professional development.

