Facilitating an Empathetic Encounter (3/6/26)

A. This Guideline describes the critical tools and methods to facilitate a successful empathetic encounter.

B. Face ot face practice will train you to discern the difference between sympathy and empathy, with the benefits and disadvantages of both.

C. How to avoid having or allowing the authority for a resolution shifted to you.

D. How to ensure that Agency is strengthened or remains with the speaker.

Facilitating

What is sympathy, and how does it differ from empathy?

- **Sympathy** is the act of figuratively putting yourself "in the shoes of another" so that you will experience the emotions they are holding and react as if their story were happening to you.
- You will feel these emotions while being unable to distinguish that these are their emotions and not your own.
- You may easily immerse yourself in the speaker's emotions and perceptions. You are likely to ***validate them and affirm their existence through your personal attunement, such as body language, emotional reactions***, ***and signals of approval and caring.***

Why? :

- As you extend this sympathy, they will feel their emotions are being cradled and nurtured by an unconditional acceptance... they may feel one or more of having been appreciated, accepted, connected, important, and vindicated.
- Existentially, we fear being alone or isolated, and biologically, we suffer when we feel disconnected. Sympathy fosters an attachment that offers both existential and biological nourishment.
- It reduces the distinction of undesirable differences between ourselves and others.

Warning:

A. When we share (experience) the suffering of others too intensely, our negative emotions increase. It carries the danger of emotional burnout.

B. Leaving the speaker at the level of only sharing their experience may actually ***enable or even build on their belief of failure, incompetence, and despair.***

Empathy

- A genuine appreciation for another's pain and suffering and desire to improve the speaker's welfare ***without taking on their distress as your own or evaluating/judging what they say or do.***
- This may give you space to be able to support the speaker's commitment to take action for finding and implementing a positive solution.
- Is expressing concern for another's problems while not accepting or usurping the responsibility for doing something about them; not allowing the aggrieved to experience the temporary relief or guilt on shifting the burden of their distress onto you or someone else.
- Our own range of emotions does not disappear in practicing empathy; it's just that we are less likely to feel distressed ourselves. Empathy allows us to stay aware of our own negative emotions from a calmer mindset, without letting them get in the way of our listening.
- The human species possesses what is known as the Bias Mechanism, which is critical to survival and avoiding danger, yet has a negative aspect too, called **Confirmation Bias.**
  (Note: More on this later.)
- Thus, empathy is an antidote; it allows us to appreciate others' suffering, without being pulled into the depths of their own distress.
- Where sympathy is the act of feeling for someone ("I am so sorry you are hurting"), empathy involves feeling with someone ("I get your disappointment").
- It also differs from compassion, which is a caring concern for another's distress from a slightly greater distance and often includes a desire to help.
- Empathy involves not just feelings but thoughts, and it encompasses two people—the person we are feeling for and our own self.
- Empathy also differs from Compassion, which is a profound caring for another's suffering from a greater distance that may include a desire and commitment to help.

Guidelines for Effective Empathy Building

Preparation: Start by taking time to practice the following skills with yourself… your ability to understand and describe your own behavior and emotions will directly affect your ability to empathize with others.

- Think of a difficult time that you experienced, then answer all the questions below related to your own perception and the resulting emotional experience.
- There is one talker and one listener
- The listener is responsible for accepting/appreciating the emotional and behavioral content their partner is sharing.
- Declare your promise of confidentiality
- It may be useful to relay back to your partner:
    - What was their perception of the occurrence?
    - What was troubling about this occurrence?
    - What were the emotions that they experienced at the time of the occurrence?
    - What feelings are being expressed in this moment?
    - What are they expecting from you?

Tip #1: While listening

- Maintain direct eye contact
- Lean in, directly facing the other person
- Avoid crossing legs or folding arms.
- Take brief one or two-word notes if needed
- When possible, avoid having a desk or any structure between you.
- Keep facial muscles relaxed without showing expressions of approval or disapproval, I.e.
    - Laughter
    - Frowning
    - Rolling of eyes
    - Wrinkling of nose
    - Frequent nodding of the head (approval)
    - Shaking of head sideways (disapproval)
- Do use signs of understanding:

    - A quick, faint smile
    - Verbal: “I see”, or “I get it”.
- Be patient with silence; let them fill the gap with further sharing.
- If they disengage, wander or attempt to stifle their story, bring them back with a calm “tell me more about _____”, or “you were just saying _____”.
- If strong emotions appear (crying, fear, shock, surprise, disgust) let them play out in silence without comment or offering anything to distract their expression.
- If any of these extend too long or become exaggerated, take a break to allow calm to return or call for help.
- Have a reachable box of Kleenex and water nearby if needed.

Tip #2: When asking questions:

- Avoid preambles or explanations for context (The more you “frame” the question, the more you will restrict, exaggerate or narrow their response. You are telegraphing what you believe or want to hear and **often will shape their answers to anticipate what you want confirmed**, rather than their reality.
- Examples:
    - “What is it like working for your boss? Because I hear that he’s difficult to work for.” or,
    - “What do you think of the challenges you're experiencing within your team, since I am aware that your manager has done a great job with creating a positive culture?”
    -

Tip #3: Allow yourself to be curious and open-minded

- Choose to listen as if your only job is to make sense of what they are saying, making the most of your questions open-ended (Ie, ***what, where, when, why, how, who, which***).

- You will have preconceptions and opinions during the exchange. Notice and choose to listen without having them get in the way… allow yourself to believe that you know nothing… everything you need to know about your partner you will be learning right now.

- Free yourself from the assessment of trying to create consistency between your feelings/perceptions and your partner’s feelings/perceptions. For now, just focus on absorbing your partner's unique experience.

Tip #4: If you are being judged, allow yourself to listen, knowing you are not personally responsible for the content for how it has been interpreted.

- Listen as though the narrative is not about you while controlling your defensiveness or guardedness.
- Utilize the Communication Guidelines™, especially open-ended questions, layering, and the Sound of Silence.
- Notice your biases (opinions) and choose not to let them control your actions (see rules below).

Tip $5: Be vulnerable and accept your body's natural response.

- If your empathy encourages you to experience authentic, solid emotions of your own (as opposed to emotions related to suppression, avoidance, denial, or defensiveness), let them flow as long as they are not disruptive (anger) and hold an awareness of which emotions are yours and which emotions are your partners.
- Feeling the sadness of your partner may bring tears…
- **Know that your time for expression will come…** your ability to meet the emotional needs of your partner will best prepare them to do the same for you.

The speaker has the responsibility of allowing themselves to be vulnerable enough to transmit the emotional content.

- To do so necessitates that you allow an honest emotional expression.
- **The talker needs to feel the emotional impact of the narrative,** as opposed to talking about the subject as a third party or in a guarded manner of a dispassionate observer.
- If the talker is disconnected from their emotions, then it will be very difficult for the partner/listener to be empathetic – it is hard to understand or identify an emotion that is being guarded, avoided, distracted from, repressed, etc.
- **Be clear about the way the narrative affects them emotionally.**
- Do not attempt to summarize the conversation, it is not helpful to say things like**, "this experience left me feeling _____ at the time… right now I am feeling _____ about the whole thing."**

- It is easiest for your partner to hear you when you take responsibility for your own emotional reactions. **Actions or situations don't make every person feel the same way… explain why the action encouraged your unique emotional response.**
- **Explain why the event was significant to your past.** We all have early life experiences that influence our emotional reactions in the present… help your partner to understand why the example causes an increased emotional response from you.
- **As the talker, tell your partner you chose to come to you…** if you want them to listen, tell them: **"I just need you to listen to me… I really am not asking for any solutions from you to try and fix it… just your listening will make me feel better."**

<u>Rules or codes of conduct – things that you should not do… behaviors to avoid</u>

(These rules are helpful in general, but they are specific to this empathy exercise – There will be appropriate times to defend yourself.)

Some rules are more important for the listener, and some rules are more important for the talker.

1. **<u>Avoid being 'Right'</u>- avoid using logic and reason in the attempt to 'disprove' the validity of your partner's emotional reaction or narrative.**
   - Doing so can lead your partner to feel belittled, patronized, powerless, insecure, misunderstood, or attacked.
   - **It does not matter that you believe your partner 'misperceived' the event… your partner's emotional reactions are related to his/her perceptions (and not a 'fixed' or 'true' reality).** Empathizing and getting their perception will nurture your partner towards recovery.
   - Be interested in and accepting of your partner's experience, as opposed to being fixated on making their perception consistent with your perception (this is futile anyway, as all our perceptions are subjective… yours too.)
   - **Example –** your partner tells you that they were hurt that you did not show up for their meeting or call to let them know, and you respond, "I told you months ago that I would not be there… You can't be upset at me because you knew I had that business trip."
   - **Being "right" is very often wrong and ironically 'irrational'** – in this example, the feeling exists and requires empathy to be resolved. This response will make your

partner feel worse... it is therefore irrational to be 'rational' in such an instance, as doing so perpetuates the problem you are seeking to resolve.

2. **<u>Avoid being defensive</u> – avoid correcting the plot line. Avoid using justifications. Avoid correcting what you view as a 'misperception'. Avoid explaining why you did what you did.**

   - Doing so can make your partner feel frustrated, unheard, confused (by your somewhat irrelevant retort), and unimportant.
   - The way that your partner perceived the event is all that matters. **Allow yourself to notice your mind's desire to correct the plot and then allow yourself to accept your partner's subjective perception.**
   - **Example –** your partner tells you that they were upset that you forgot to pick them up last Friday, and you respond that "it was last Thursday, and I didn't forget, you were just really busy.
   - Can you imagine any situation in which the above response would make things better?

3. **<u>Avoid counter-critiquing</u> – avoid responding to your partner's constructive criticism with your own criticisms about them.**

   - Doing so can leave your partner feeling annoyed, not listened to, invalidated, unimportant, frustrated, escalated, and desperate.
   - Often the narrative that you will need to listen to will be about you in some way... allow your partner the space for expression... this is his/her time.
   - **Example –** your partner tells you that they really feel unacknowledged when you don't thank them for fulfilling a promise, and you respond, "Yeah, well, I do a lot of things around here that I don't get any credit for either."
   - It is not that your response is invalid; rather, your response takes the focus away from your partner's feelings and justifies your actions and is dismissive or theirs... **your distraction or tangent will disrupt both your and their ability to attend to emotional content and what could be changed.**

4. **<u>Avoid generalizations –</u> making overgeneralizations will lead to your partner feeling hopeless and therefore more likely to 'tune out'. Being very specific allows your partner to better understand you.**
    - Doing so can make your partner feel attacked, defeated, as if you don't want a solution, as if you are being too excessive to relate to, and irritated.
    - **Example –** you want to tell your partner that you miss them being available like they used to be, and you say, "Well, you know that I have a lot of travel time."
    - **Overgeneralizations tend not to have solutions, and they catastrophize, which is isolating.**

5. **<u>Avoid being contemptuous or trying to prove that your partner is inherently flawed.</u> Avoid trying to attach permanent negative labels on your partner. Avoid pathologizing your partner.**
    - In short, being mean doesn't help anyone and usually creates more guilt to manage later.
    - Doing so can make your partner feel abused, defeated, hopeless, wounded, in danger, scared, angry, and likely to give up.
    - **Example –** "Yesterday, when you told me you couldn't figure out the copier before my meeting, I realized that you are just stupid."
    - How do you fix stupid, and what is the emotion for which this person would appreciate empathy?

-

6. **<u>Avoid distractions, tuning out, or putting up a figurative wall</u>**
    - Doing so can make your partner feel alone, isolated, unimportant, frustrated, desperate, and out of control.
    - **Stay emotionally available**… track the narrative and the emotions being displayed. Do not literally or figuratively leave (I.e., look around, look at your watch or the clock, take a phone call, etc.)
    - **If you are overwhelmed, please ask for a break and take some time to cool down** (as it doesn't help if you get overly emotionally escalated to the point of losing

control). **When you take a break, tell your partner what you are doing and when you can return.**

- **Example –** your partner says, "I am really worried about … I feel like a bad manager," and you respond, "Yeah, … could you pass me the coffee?"

7. **<u>Avoid creating the Guessing game.</u> Be clear about your needs and emotions… do not set your partner up to fail by requiring them to guess what you are feeling or what you need.**
   - Doing so can make your partner feel inadequate, a failure, incompetent, helpless, confused, guilty, or at a loss.
   - Always avoid saying one thing when you mean another… do not say it is ok if it is not ok.
   - I**t is a huge misconception that "if your partner cares about you, they will intuitively know what you need and take action to meet your needs."** The truth is that we are often very poor at identifying and meeting our own needs…
   - This expectation will leave you frustrated without your needs being met.
   - If you want something… ask for it.
   - **If you want your partner to listen and to not fix it… tell them that.**
8. **Do not bring your complaints or concerns about another associate to anyone else.**
   - **Exception:**
     - If you have already shared these directly with that associate and you have let them know that you will be seeking coaching yourself on how best to support them, or
     - If you do not reveal who you are asking for coaching on how to handle it, or
     - You have been permission to do so.
   - **<u>Especially</u>** if you are violating confidentiality.