



Paul Burke Training Group

PO Box 39027, RPO James Bay, VICTORIA, B.C., V8V 4X8
Telephone: 1-250-385-6468. Toll-Free: 1-855-MI-TRAINERS
Web: www.paulburketraining.com
E-mail: info@paulburketraining.com

Beyond training: Looking at learning MI in a whole new light!

Thoughts on Improved Practice (TIP) #1822

Empathy in Helping: Who Cares?



You may have noticed that M.I. training loans a ton of attention to the process of “empathy” in the helping relationship. In fact, empathic engagement with clients lies at the very core of everything else that follows in MI work. Without the ability to establish empathy with the client’s point of view (and to get that happening quickly), there is not a whole lot of point in worrying about use of the other skills and principles. It’s simple. *Until and unless you have empathy with your client’s point of view, your client is not yet your client.* Most good MI practitioners will tell you that it is the point at which you achieve “empathic join up” with your client’s logic that you and your client have entered into the process of partnership – an essential ingredient in these types of helpful conversations!

So, with all this focus on empathy, the question could be posed: “Who really cares?”

It appears that clients do. That’s who!

There is a fascinating journal article by Moyers and Miller in “*Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*” (October 1, 2012) in which they pose the question “**Is Low Therapist Empathy Toxic**”? They cite a host of research related to how empathy impacts client outcomes, the answer to their question is an obvious, and resounding YES. Summarizing a large body of research on the matter, they state that

High-empathy counselors appear to have higher success rates regardless of theoretical orientation. Low-empathy and confrontational counseling, in contrast, has been associated with higher drop-out and relapse rates, weaker therapeutic alliance, and less client change (p.1)

Empathy – including the ability to establish it, AND the ability to (accurately) convey it to your clients matters to them. It matters because the more skill you have in establishing and maintaining empathy, the better the results that your clients are going to obtain from working with you. Thus, assuming that your clients want more than just a nice, friendly, and relative pain-free conversation to come out of the time spent with talking with a professional helper, you’ll be most able to be useful if you become very

polished you're your skills as a "Motivational Empath" (a new title that I just invented – but I love it – so I'm sticking with it.) This week, I'll review a few ideas around empathy.



Empathy forms as a by-product of high-caliber listening and reflecting skills – most of which are not “innate” in us. Fortunately for the sake of our clients though, empathy skills can be learned!

An essential point raised in the Moyers and Miller article is that empathy is a “therapeutic skill” (not just a “feeling”, as many people think). They suggest that it involves:

- A commitment to understanding the client’s personal frame of reference, and
- The ability to convey this ‘heard meaning’ back to the client (using accurate complex reflections)
- Willingness and skill in getting to both the cognitive and emotional aspects of what the client is saying (and perhaps even of what s/he is *not* saying)
- Attunement to what the client is experiencing, with both thoughts and feelings, as the process of the session unfolds

In MI-3, Miller and Rollnick quote Carl Rogers, (grandfather of the idea that empathy is an energy source that fuels the ability to be helpful to others) where Rogers says that empathy is all about sensing “the client’s inner world of private, personal meanings, as if it were your own, but without ever living the “as if” quality” (Rogers, 1989, cited in MI-3, p. 18). Roger’s understanding of empathy ran deep. Nobody would argue that Rogers’ constant focus on the need to be able to connect with the client’s way of thinking is an idea of his that is the most studied, and most appreciated about his work.


The relationship between empathy and reflective listening: At the base of all empathy, of course, lies the skill of accurate reflective listening – where the emphasis is on reflecting the MEANING behind what a client is saying (complex reflection) – and not just on the content of WHAT s/he is saying (simple reflection). Of course, if one understands the meaning behind a “clump” of content, such understanding will also be able to be reflected in accurate reflections of affect (emotion). Thus, well-formed reflections, and the ability to use at least as many complex reflections as simple ones is a skill set that cannot be overlearned in MI. (Have you ever checked your ratio of simple-to-complex reflections? If not – try it!)

Helping people to develop skill as a “communication empath” can sometimes be tough sledding for an MI trainer.

“Why is that?”, you may ask. Well, here are a few of the bad habits that sometimes show up when learning MI. These really get in the way:

- Some people seem to listen reflectively only so that they can “get it over with”. They seem to think that after-the-listening is over “Now I can get on to the important stuff that I have to say to this client!”

- Some people seem to confuse empathizing with the client's point of view with "yes, I've been there too – and because I can remember what my experience was like, that means I understand your experience too"! (Wrong).
- Some people seem to think that they don't need to invest in *conveying* empathy – as long as they *feel* empathy.
- Some people don't much like the point of view of the person they are empathizing with – so they avoid trying to understand. (It's true that it is easier to empathize with some clients than others. It's difficult to empathize with clients who have different ideas, values, and desires than you do, or with people who have ways of seeing things that threaten your own sense of "right and wrong")

	<p>I've even heard a few workshop participants say "my agency doesn't list empathy as a core competency – and I am evaluated only on the basis of core competencies – so I have to be careful with where I invest my effort. Learning to use the new computer software is more important right now."</p> <p>That's kind of sad.</p> <p>When an agency doesn't recognize empathy (and the skills in which empathy is reflected) as a core competency - then, of course, they're not going to support their staff in acquiring more capacity in this regard. People need time, practice, and feedback to get good at anything they do.</p>
--	--

As recently as 2011, the American Psychological Association Task Force on Evidence-Based Therapy Relationships listed empathy as an evidence-based element of good counselling practice (see Norcross and Wampold, 2011, as cited in Moyers in Miller, 2012, op. cit). Along with that, they make the case for the provision of training programs that implement competency-based criteria that will help provide measurable "evidence" to practitioners that they have empathic competencies – or not.

Yay for the APA! The fact is, there is no point in knowing what constitutes "evidence-based practice" if nobody cares if there is evidence of the practice showing up in client-counsellor communications! Getting to an evidence-based level of empathic communication takes some time, and some real investment in supervision, training, and practice opportunity - on both the part of helping professionals and their employer-agencies. **With research evidence such as we now have from Moyers and Miller and with recommendations coming from organizations as credible as the APA, we now have some pretty good reasons to suggest that the uptake of reflective listening is not just a nice thing to promote. In fact, failure to promote it, and support it, means dollars down the drain. And – more importantly, it means that clients get poorer results than they deserve.**



See you again soon!