

Distinguishing Between Empathic Responses

At times, it can be difficult to distinguish between the different types of therapist empathic responses. It should be emphasized that the examples given in this book are prototypical of their particular category. Some therapist empathic responses will fall between these categories. For example, there may be a strong degree of overlap between an empathic evocation and exploration, and they can be difficult to distinguish. It is important to remember that in their prototypical form, each response will have a different primary intention. Thus, the main intention behind an empathic understanding response is to convey understanding; the intention behind an affirmation response is to validate how understandable the expressed feeling or experience is and say, "I am here with you" or "Let's stay right here." The main intention behind an empathic evocation is to deepen experience and bring it to life, and this is done through the therapist's use of metaphor, imagery, dramatic language, or vivifying of experience. The main intention behind empathic exploration is to deepen exploration, and this is done by moving the exploration forward toward the leading edges of experience with a discovery-oriented, querying tone. The main intention behind an empathic conjecture is also to deepen exploration, but this is done by "reaching in" to client current experience and hunching or guessing as to the not-yet-said or even experienced that is not yet the focus of client attention. It often has the feel of what is "behind" or "underneath" currently held experience. Conjectures, however, are not interpretations and are not intended to make links to past experiences or causes or address motivation or "reasons why."

Here we present two client statements, each followed by five therapist responses to help learners distinguish among the different types of empathic responses. These are prototypical examples of the five empathic responses to the same client statement prompts. Note that this is not possible with every type of client response because the type of therapist response given is often driven by the type of client statement offered. That is, it is determined by the client response itself and how it is most fitting for an emotion-focused therapist to respond in the moment.

Client Statement 1

[**Worried**] I'm so worried that I won't be able to pay my bills next month, and I don't even know what I can do about it. It's overwhelming.

Example Empathic Responses

- **Empathic Understanding:** It's like you are feeling very scared and lost and not sure which way to turn.
- **Empathic Affirmation:** Yes, it is so understandable that you are scared. And there is a horrible sense of powerlessness.
- **Empathic Evocation:** It's like a dark shadow looming over you, and it just feels like every which way you turn, there is a wall in front of you.
- **Empathic Exploration:** So, on the one hand, you are very worried, but on the other, feeling so stuck . . . and it's like when you go to try to take action, say to call or inquire about a job, a sinking feeling just stops you dead in your tracks.
- **Empathic Conjecture:** Feeling very overwhelmed and stuck, almost a feeling of "I am not capable of taking action, I just don't have inside what it takes." And then there is just this looming fear, that I am not going to be ok . . .

Client Statement 2

[**Worried with moist eyes**] I'd like to be nicer to my friends, but whenever I feel closer to anyone, I start thinking about how I'll eventually disappoint them.

Example Empathic Responses

- **Empathic Understanding:** So, it's hard to feel close to someone without having this fear of letting them down.
- **Empathic Affirmation:** Yes, it is understandable because you have been hurt, and it's a strong feeling of "I will disappoint them eventually" that brings the tears.
- **Empathic Evocation:** Whenever you get close to someone, it's as if a fear washes over you that says, "I will drop the ball and let them down."
- **Empathic Exploration:** Somehow just a painful feeling of, I don't know, "Don't get too close . . . I will let you down, somehow I am just bound to disappoint you . . ."
- **Empathic Conjecture:** Somehow feeling that in the end, it is a given, you will disappoint them, it's just such a painful feeling of, I don't know, but "I am not enough, and once they figure it out, they will see me and confirm that I am not enough—that there is somehow something missing, just lacking."