

End of Life Care

Understanding and using empathy

Description

This workbook describes empathy and encourages you to explore its use in the clinical setting.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session you will be able to:

- Define the term empathy
- Contrast the terms empathy, sympathy and pity
- Describe an empathic statement
- Examine the use of empathy in communication with patients and their families, and your colleagues
- Assess your confidence around putting empathy into practice

Pre-Session Reflection

Before you start the session, rate your confidence level in some areas related to empathy. You will have an opportunity to do this again at the end, and reflect on how your answers have changed. This is not a test, but an opportunity for you to see how much you know about empathy before and after completing this session. For each of the following statements state if you are:

- A. Very confident
- B. Confident
- C. Not very confident
- D. Not confident at all

Statements

1. I understand what empathy means
2. I always try to understand what patients and families are going through
3. I am confident using techniques to show empathy to patients and families

Enter your responses in the space below. For example 1 = C refers to not very confident for Statement 1 (I understand what empathy means).

1 =

2 =

3 =

Definition of Empathy

A Dictionary Definition

Empathy is a key skill in communication, allowing rapport to be created quickly and effectively. Empathy is different from sympathy and pity.

Empathy is a word that is often used without being fully understood. Before we continue, we need to be confident that you understand the meaning of the word.

Spend a moment thinking about what you think empathy means. How would you define empathy?

Another definition

Gagan (1983) defines empathy as:

The ability to perceive the meanings and feelings of another person, and to communicate that feeling to the other.

How does this definition differ from the previous one?

What is the key difference?

The key difference is that this definition includes the ability to communicate what you are seeing and hearing to the person you are talking to.

Pity and Sympathy v Empathy

Many people use the words 'pity' or 'sympathy' when they mean 'empathy'. These words all mean slightly different things.

Think about what pity and sympathy mean. Below is a definition of each term. Think about how these definitions differ from the definition of empathy presented earlier.

Pity

Here is a definition of the term pity:

Feeling that someone is in trouble or in need of help - often expressed as feeling sorry for someone.

Sympathy

Here is a definition of the term sympathy:

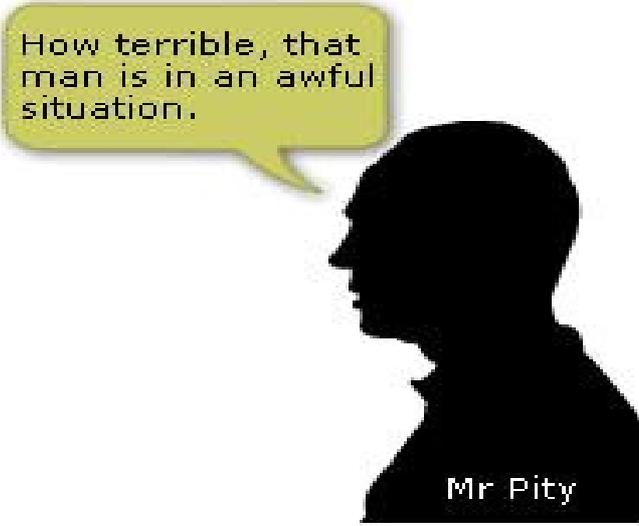
The practitioner experiences feelings as if he or she were the sufferer, so in effect the feelings are shared. Part of this may be a feeling of wanting the other person to feel better or happier.

Here is another way of thinking about the difference between pity, sympathy and empathy.

Imagine a man who can't swim, who has fallen into a canal. He is struggling and calling for help.

Three men, Mr Pity, Mr Sympathy and Mr Empathy all walk by the man.

Mr Pity's Response:



How terrible, that man is in an awful situation.

Mr Pity

Mr Pity's response has not helped the man. He has not spoken to the man or shown him that he realises that there is a problem. Mr Pity has not done anything about the problem and has just walked on.

Mr Sympathy's Response:

How terrible for that poor man. I must help him.



*Mr Sympathy's response was to jump into the canal with the struggling man. They are now both struggling and Mr Sympathy is no nearer to rescuing the drowning man. Mr Sympathy is now sharing the situation with the drowning man, and is **overwhelmed** by it.*

Mr Empathy's Response:

I can see and hear that those people are really struggling. I can help them by staying on the bank, holding on tight and pulling them in with a rope.



*Mr Empathy helps Mr Sympathy and the man by staying on the bank holding on tight and pulling them both in with a rope. He is **'anchored'** and will not get swept away by the canal. He has acted on what he saw and heard, but has **stayed on the side** - from where he can help.*

Reflection

Before continuing with the session, spend some time thinking about what has been covered so far.

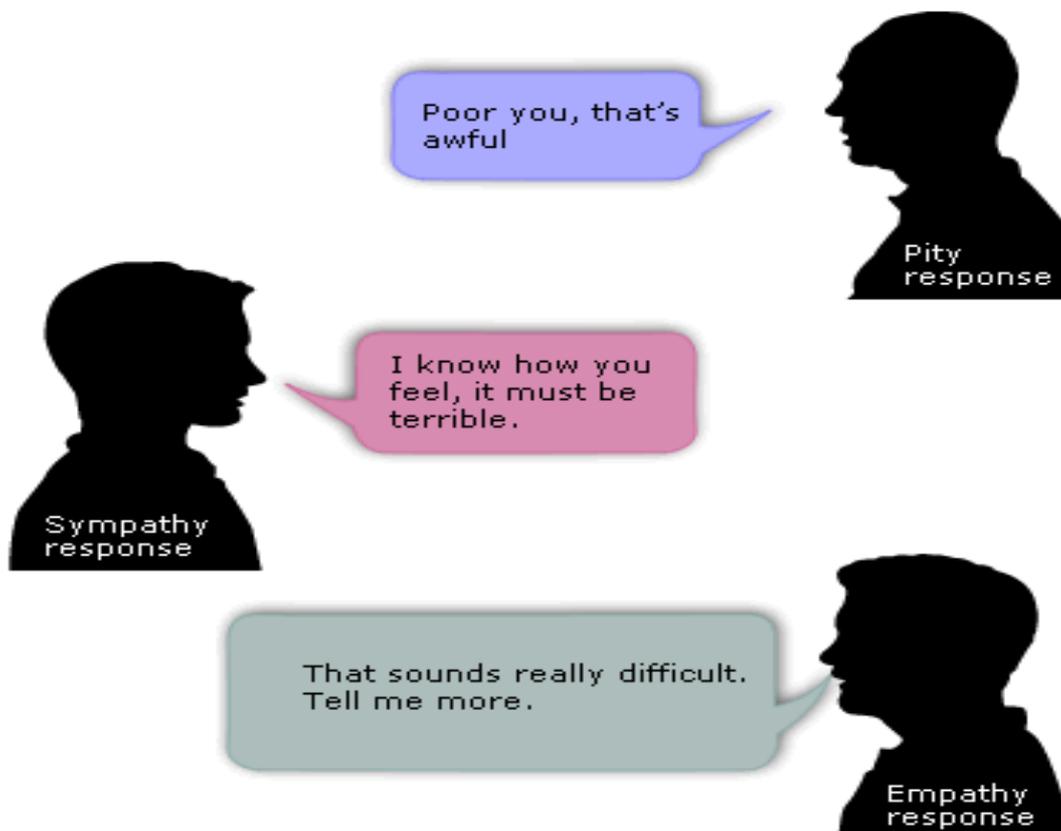
- What have you learnt about empathy?
 - Has anything surprised you?
 - Think about how you respond to patients' feelings. Are you empathic – or perhaps sympathetic? How well do your responses work?
-

Expressions of Pity, Sympathy and Empathy

This next section will think about some expressions of pity, sympathy and empathy. Consider the following statement. The image shows a pity, sympathy and empathy response to this statement.

"I've felt so terrible since they told me that I have terminal cancer and I just can't sleep."

Look at each response. How do you think the patient will feel after each one and how might they respond?



Feedback

Pity response

After the comment "Poor you, that's awful", the patient may not feel listened to. They have no indication that the person they are talking to has actually heard what they have said.

Sympathy response

After the sympathy comment "I know how you feel, it must be terrible", the patient may find it difficult to continue with what they want to say, as the professional has closed down the conversation. The comment has also taken the focus away from the patient towards the professional.

Empathy response

After the empathic statement, the patient will feel listened to and able to continue, as it is clear that the professional is trying to understand, and to help if possible. Therefore, the most helpful comment is the empathic one, as it allows the patient to respond and continue with explaining their story and their concerns. This then allows a proper dialogue between the patient and health care professional, that addresses the patient's concerns and makes him or her feel listened to and understood. This is a powerful position from which to negotiate a plan that is acceptable to both parties.

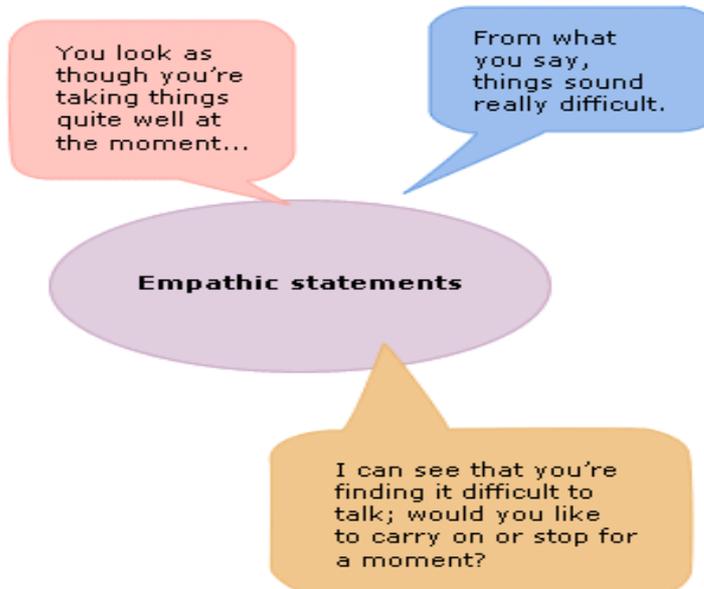
Empathic Statements

When you are trying to convey empathy, use 'empathic statements'.

It is one way of showing the person you are talking to that you are trying to be empathic.

The following image shows some examples of empathic statements. Notice that all of these focus on the person you're talking to, rather than on you.

Remember, once you try empathic techniques you will find your own words; these examples simply present some phrases to illustrate the principle of using empathic statements.



Empathy or Sympathy Statement

Check to see whether you have understood what empathy is; how it differs from sympathy, and what an empathic statement is.

Empathy	Sympathy
From what you're telling me, things must be really hard	That's terrible
That sounds awful	I know how you feel
I think you're saying that life's very difficult now – am I right?	I understand what you're going through

- **From what you're telling me, things must be really hard:** Empathy keeps the focus on the other person, rather than on you
- **That sounds awful:** You are telling the other person that you are trying to understand the world from their point of view
- **I think you're saying that life's very difficult now – am I right?** This is an educated guess – another way of saying that you are trying to understand the patient's perspective
- **I know how you feel:** Remember, you never know exactly how the patient feels because you are not the patient
- **That's terrible:** It is more empathic to say 'that sounds terrible' or 'from what you tell me, that sounds terrible' – keeping the focus on what the other person is saying
- **I understand what you're going through:** This puts the focus on you rather than the person you are talking to, which makes it more sympathetic than empathic. Remember, you can never truly understand because you are not the patient

Other ways to show empathy

There are lots of ways to show empathy; using empathic statements is just one of them.

Can you think of non-verbal communication and other verbal communication skills that you could use to show empathy?

Feedback

Using non-verbal communication you can show empathy by:

- Mirroring posture
- Active listening, without interruption
- Use of silence to let the patient gather their thoughts

Using verbal communication you can show empathy by:

- Mirroring the patient's words
- Picking up cues that the patient drops
- Using educated guesses

A Biological basis using empathy



Did you know – research has found a potential biological basis for empathy?

Imagine an experiment where someone is eating some delicious food while having their brain scanned. You are watching them, and your brain is being scanned. When they eat, a part of their brain lights up on the scanner – they are processing the taste and enjoying the sensation. When you watch them eat, the same part of your brain lights up, although you have not moved. It is as if you are having the same experience as them.

This also happens when you watch someone else going through an emotion. For example, when you feel upset at giving someone bad news, your brain is feeling the bad news as if it applied to you.

Some scientists believe that these 'mirror neurone systems' may help us to understand what others are going through. We call this 'empathy'.

Feedback

Showing empathy has the following uses:

- Builds trust and therefore rapport
- Allows people to tell you their concerns
- Gives you space to check that you have really understood what the other person is saying
- Lets you stand back from the situation and check that you have understood it fully before you try to help

Empathy will help you in any conversation that you have. While this session has focussed on conversations with patients and families, don't forget that all these techniques will help you when you are talking to colleagues, whether you are negotiating something difficult or disagreeing about something. Empathy will help you to understand where the other person is 'coming from' and this helps whoever you are talking to.

Using Empathy – Worries you might have

Many people worry about using empathy for a variety of reasons. Below is a list of some reasons that people might give for not using empathy.

Lack of time

Empathic communication helps to focus on what really matters to the patient, which can speed up communication.

Fear of getting overwhelmed by the patient's emotions

Empathy can help you to stay separate from the other's emotions so that you are able to help. Remember that when you are empathic you are also 'anchored' safely, like Mr Empathy in the story.

Lack of training

Complete this session and look for further training near you.

Developing your Skills Further

Use the following techniques to help develop your empathy skills further:

- When you see other people talking to patients and families, see whether they use empathic statements – and what effect they have
- Try using empathic statements yourself. How does it feel? How does the other person respond? You may wish to practise this at work – or even at home!

- Face-to-face training, using role play, will help you to see how empathy works and practise using it in a safe environment. There may be courses near you. You could ask your local cancer network or hospice for local information
- Talk to colleagues who have been on face-to-face training courses – are they using empathic statements? How do they find it?

Post Session Reflection

Having completed this session, rate your confidence level in the same areas related to empathy as you did at the start of the session. For each of the following statements state if you are:

- A. Very confident
- B. Confident
- C. Not very confident
- D. Not confident at all

Statements

1. I understand what empathy means
2. I always try to understand what patients and families are going through
3. I am confident using techniques to show empathy to patients and families

Enter your responses in the space below.

1 =

2 =

3 =

Now compare your pre-session and post-session reflection on each statement. Use the guidance below to develop your knowledge and skills further. Here is a reminder of the confidence levels:

- A. Very confident
- B. Confident
- C. Not very confident
- D. Not confident at all

Statement 1: I understand what empathy means

- If your confidence has increased compared to where it was at the start - well done. Now you need to look at how to show empathy
- If you are less confident about this statement compared to the start, revisit the first part of the session which looks at what empathy means. There are also some suggestions in Further Reading and Activities in the Session Summary that may help you

Statement 2: I always try to understand what patients and families are going through

- If your confidence has increased compared to the start – well done. Completing this session should have helped you to learn some techniques for understanding what patients and families are going through
- If you are less confident about this statement than you were at the start, then this may be because you have realised how important understanding empathy is. Some of the suggestions in Further Reading and Activities in the Session Summary may help you to explore this further

Statement 3: I am confident using techniques to show empathy to patients and families

- If your confidence has increased compared to the start, then well done. You now need to practise these techniques – suggestions for how you might do this are detailed in 'Developing Your Skills Further'.
- If you are less confident about this now than you were at the start, reflect on why this is – you may simply be realising that there are new techniques to be learnt and practise

Key Points

- Empathy - 'seeing the world from another's position' – is a key skill
- As well as being empathic you need to demonstrate your empathy to the patient. This is done using empathic statements as well as other verbal and non-verbal techniques
- Empathic responses or statements will help to build a rapport with patients and families and will encourage them to share their concerns with you

Summary

Learning Objectives

Having completed this session you will be able to:

- Define the term empathy
- Contrast the terms empathy, sympathy and pity
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Reflections Summary

Here is a reminder of each statement:

- Statement 1: I understand what empathy means
- Statement 2: I always try to understand what patients and families are going through
- Statement 3: I am confident using techniques to show empathy to patients and families

Here is a reminder of the confidence levels:

- A. Very confident
- B. Confident
- C. Not very confident
- D. Not confident at all

Further Reading and Activities

Refer to the following text for additional information:

- [How mirror neurones allow us to learn and socialise](http://www.sciencecentric.com/news/08122017-how-mirror-neurones-allow-us-learn-socialise-by-going-through-the-motions-the-head.html)
<http://www.sciencecentric.com/news/08122017-how-mirror-neurones-allow-us-learn-socialise-by-going-through-the-motions-the-head.html>
- Gagan, J.M. (1983) Methodological notes on empathy. *ANS Adv Nurs Sci*, 5 (2) p65–72.