

COUNSELLING SKILLS AND STUDIES

FIONA BALLANTINE DYKES ● TRACI POSTINGS ● BARRY KOPP
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR ANTHONY CROUCH

3RD
EDITION



S Sage



1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks
California 91320

Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower
Nehru Place, New Delhi – 110 019

8 Marina View Suite 43-053
Asia Square Tower 1
Singapore 018960

Editor: Susannah Trefgarne
Editorial Assistant: Harry Dixon
Production Editor: Neelu Sahu
Copyeditor: Joy Tucker
Proofreader: Genevieve Friar
Indexer: Cathryn Pritchard
Marketing Manager: Ruslana Khatagova
Cover Design: Sheila Tong
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

© Fiona Ballantine Dykes, Traci Postings and Barry Kopp 2024

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research, private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023946939

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5296-7105-6
ISBN 978-1-5296-7104-9 (pbk)

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	ix
<i>About the authors</i>	xiii
<i>Videos to support your learning</i>	xv
Introduction	1
Part I: Counselling Skills	11
1 Using counselling skills ethically and safely	13
2 Establishing a helping relationship	21
3 Working empathically as a helper	32
4 Focusing on the helpee's needs and concerns	43
5 Using self-awareness in helping work	59
6 Using counselling skills	73
7 Using reflection and feedback to enhance counselling skills	102
Part II: Counselling Studies	113
8 Preparing to work within an ethical and legal framework as a counsellor	115
9 Understanding the counselling relationship	138
10 Understanding difference and diversity to develop empathic understanding	156
11 Working within a user-centred approach to counselling	172
12 Using theory and insight to increase self-awareness	183

viii **Counselling skills and studies**

13	Understanding theories of counselling in practice	206
14	Using supervision to support counselling	240
	Part III: Counselling Study Skills	255
15	Motivation and blocks to learning	257
16	Essay writing skills	269
17	Journal writing skills	277
18	Self-care	287
19	Critical thinking	301
20	Experiential learning	309
21	Research in counselling and helping work	319
	<i>References</i>	334
	<i>Index</i>	338

3

Working Empathically as a Helper

This chapter is concerned with the meaning and purpose of empathy in the helping role and is also about how personal issues, fears and prejudices impact on the ability to empathise with others.

EMPATHY



What do we mean by empathy and what is its role in a helping relationship?



Let's begin in the usual way by looking at what the word 'empathy' actually means.

Empathy: the ability to share someone else's feelings or experience by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation. (dictionary.cambridge.org)

When working in a helping or counselling role, it means to gain an insight and appreciation of someone's situation, thoughts and feelings.

It is often said that empathy is 'seeing the world through someone else's eyes, feeling it through their heart'. To truly empathise is to actually work hard to understand the helpee and then communicate to them that you do understand.



So empathy is a bit like sympathy.



No, but that's a very common misunderstanding. Empathy is actually very different from sympathy. Sympathy is something that is done *to* someone. Empathy is something that is done *with* someone. Sympathy suggests feeling sorry for someone and that in turn suggests some sort of power imbalance, i.e. the person sympathising is in a greater position of power. Empathy is about being on an equal footing, by entering into the helpee's world to try to understand and also communicating with each other to clarify and confirm that understanding. So, the helper needs to enter the helpee's *frame of reference* to be able to imagine how they are feeling. 'Frame of reference' is a common counselling term and simply means seeing things from the

helpee's point of view. The helper can then communicate their understanding to the helpee and they in turn can confirm that understanding.

Perhaps another way of explaining it is that sympathy is really about recognising someone's feelings and feeling FOR them, while empathy is actually sharing someone's feelings and feeling WITH them, if only briefly. So empathy is a deeper emotional experience.



CRITICAL THINKING

This raises an interesting question. Is it possible to empathise with someone who you don't feel sympathy for?

Consider this example: if you heard that someone had stolen a large sum of money from their elderly relatives and had then gone on to squander all the money, ending up alone and homeless, would you find it possible to empathise with them and understand the choices and reasons that drove their actions?

Would you be able to sympathise with someone who had, to all intents and purposes, brought about their own downfall?



I guess both sympathy and empathy have a role to play in relationships but, in a helping relationship, empathy is very important in terms of the helper being able to understand where the helpee is coming from.



Yes, that's very true. However, the most important thing is not about the helper understanding the helpee; it is about the helpee feeling understood. This is a vital difference – the emphasis here needs to be on the helpee, not the helper.

ACTIVITY

As you reflect on the meaning of empathy in a helping relationship, you can begin to see why it is so beneficial. Your focus can shift to the importance of understanding and feeling understood.

Complete Table 3.1, which asks you to focus on a time when you felt understood by someone and a time when you did not feel understood. Try to really clarify for yourself what the other person did or said that helped you to feel understood.

- What did you need to feel understood?
- How did it feel when those needs were met?
- How did it feel when those needs were not met?

(Continued)

*(Continued)***TABLE 3.1** Feeling understood

Event	Time I felt understood	Time I didn't feel understood
What happened?		
Who was involved?		
What was said to you?		
What was the person's attitude towards you?		
How did you feel?		
How did the experience affect you?		

Q I can certainly see the importance of understanding and being understood. If I feel understood, I feel able to be honest and open about who I am and how I am feeling. If I don't feel understood, I feel judged and can begin to feel uncomfortable and even ashamed or angry. I certainly wouldn't want to talk about my problems and difficulties with someone I felt didn't understand me. I'm a bit worried that I'm not empathic enough. How can I develop the skill of empathy?

A It is important to acknowledge and accept that empathy is always a work in progress. Empathy is not a skill that is just learned and then done with. Empathy is a quality that develops over time as a relationship develops and as you work on your own self-awareness and insights. In order to develop the quality of empathy, there is a need to be honest about personal prejudices and stereotypes. Bring them into the light of day so that their origins can be explored and new ways of understanding and challenging them can be found. You need to understand the fears and hurts in your own heart that may cause you to sit in judgement of others. Then work can be done towards self-acceptance and tolerance of personal shortcomings. If you can have empathy and understanding for yourself, you are more likely to be able to extend that acceptance to others. Empathy is on the list of personal moral qualities in the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (2018). This definition includes the importance of not just understanding another person but being able to communicate that understanding.

Q There's a lot to it but I can already see how important it is for me to build my self-awareness. I have noticed that I am more judgemental when I am not feeling good about myself.

Some days I wake up and when I look in the mirror I quite like what I see – not perfect by any means but good enough. On those days, I look around my home and feel safe and comfortable. When I leave my house, I wave to my neighbours

and go to work quite happily. At work, I hear my colleagues laughing and join in with the joking; I love working here.

Other days I wake up and look in the mirror and all I see are lines, wrinkles, grey hairs and how big my nose is. I look around the room at the mess and dust gathering; everything looks cluttered and gets on my nerves. As I leave I see my neighbour looking over at me and think, 'What does that so-and-so think he's looking at? He can get lost.' I arrive at work and as I walk into the room everyone's laughing. I hate them all; they all turn to look at me and the laughter stops. I think they've been talking about me and I feel like just running out and never coming back. I hate working here.

On both of these days, my face hasn't changed, my house hasn't changed, my neighbour and work colleagues haven't changed. What has changed is my perception. I sit in judgement on everything because of my perception and how I feel about myself. It's like wearing the opposite of rose-tinted glasses. I have learned, though, that when I feel that way, I can't always trust my judgements.



That's a good example. It also highlights the need for a helper to practise self-care in order to be able to be present and attentive to the helpee's needs. However, there will still be issues or situations that you find difficult to understand and empathise with. It is important to know your personal blocks to empathy so that you can explore and resolve them. It is simply not possible to offer empathy to someone you are judging.



Actually, I don't really sit in judgement. I know that we are all the same really and therefore I will try to treat everyone accordingly.

WORKING WITH DIFFERENCE



That's interesting; do you really believe that everyone is the same? That statement makes an assumption and once we make assumptions we stop really listening to someone because we assume we already know what they are like and how they are feeling. In truth, we are not all the same; we are all very different. We can learn so much about each other by learning about our differences and how they impact on our relationships and life in general. Let's imagine someone who was in a wheelchair wanted to meet and talk with you; if you assume that everyone is the same, you will not be able to acknowledge that the person in the wheelchair has different needs from a person who is able to walk. In the same way, if you assume that we are all the same, you will assume that we all have the same needs and this is simply not true. It can be very dangerous to make assumptions. In a helping relationship, we work hard to truly listen to and understand someone. We value their uniqueness and individuality. We take time to consider what it might be like for them in their

situation, and to do that we need to understand what blocks us from empathising. It can actually take a lot of courage to acknowledge difference and diversity and also to look at our own reactions to it. It is hard sometimes to admit we have prejudices and that we hold various stereotypes. It can also be difficult to air our fears and reflect on where they have come from.

STEREOTYPING

Let's begin by exploring what we mean by a stereotype:

A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

For example, 'All teenagers are rebels' or 'All French people are romantic'. When we stereotype, we assume that an individual has exactly the same characteristics, abilities and behaviours of a whole group, race, culture, etc.

Stereotyping can seem to help us simplify social situations because in a way we are calling on our past experience, beliefs and what we have been told to make a rapid appraisal of a person or situation. Unfortunately, when we stereotype we stop seeing someone as an individual and assume we know all about them, without taking the time to get to know them. We ignore differences between individuals from the same group, race and culture and so on. We actually believe things about someone that simply aren't true, and when we do that we judge them; and once we judge, we are unable to empathise. In addition, most stereotypes are negative and assume characteristics that are unpleasant or horrible.

It is not always a bad thing to hold stereotypes. Most of us hold stereotypes and actually sometimes we need them to make snap judgements to keep ourselves safe. For example, if I were walking towards my car late at night and saw a group of hooded youths coming towards me making a lot of noise, I would almost definitely hurry to get into my car and lock the door. My stereotype would probably be: all youth wearing hoodies are troublemakers. I would most likely assume that they intended to harm me and my fear would urge me to make myself safe. Once I had time to reflect, I could challenge my stereotype. There is no way I could know for sure that this particular group of youths meant me harm and certainly not all young people are troublemakers, but in that moment of fear my stereotype made a judgement and I acted on that.

Our stereotypes come from many places. Some are based very loosely on the truth of other people's experiences. We may have been told things about groups of people as we grew up. We may have been hurt or frightened by someone from a particular group and then made the assumption that all people from that group are the same. We will have picked stereotypes up from a wide range of places, people and experiences.

What we need to do is be able to see past our stereotypes, explore where they came from and then challenge how accurate they are. When we meet someone and make a judgement based on their characteristics, we are almost certainly making that judgement from a stereotype. Once we are able to acknowledge that and challenge it, we are then free to see the person as an individual.

ACTIVITY

Complete the following with the first things you think of. You could write one or several words.

Americans are ...

Germans are ...

French people are ...

Italians are ...

Scottish people are ...

English people are ...

Welsh people are ...

Irish people are ...

Young people are ...

Old people are ...

People with red hair are ...

Women with blonde hair are ...

Single parents are ...

Black people are ...

White people are ...

People on benefits are ...

Immigrants are ...

Mentally ill people are ...

Fat people are ...

Thin people are ...

Rich people are ...

Women are ...

(Continued)

(Continued)

- When writing the words you associated with each group, were you able to be honest or did you censor your responses, fearing you would be judged if you were brutally honest?
- Do you have specific personal experiences that inform the words you wrote for each group?
- If you have no personal experience, what led you to write the words you did?
- Were the words you wrote mostly positive or negative?
- Did it make a difference if you belonged to one of the groups listed?
- Have you ever been judged based on a stereotype?
- How did this feel, and what did you do in response to the judgement?
- What do you think influenced your answers – friends, TV, newspapers, parents, etc.?
- Do you believe the words you wrote are true?
- What are the possible negative effects of stereotyping?
- If we judge based on the actions of a few, how can we explore, understand and move past our judgements?
- Can you judge a person on only a few characteristics?
- Does it make a difference to your attitude if you know someone personally?
- How will the above activities support your helping work?



It's difficult to be honest when writing about stereotypes. I feel ashamed about some of the things I think and want to keep them to myself.



Yes, once stereotypes are opened up and explored, it can be quite shocking to confront the thoughts and judgements we hold about groups of people. To help us move past our fear and shame around the stereotypes we hold, and in order to challenge and understand them, we can think of them as being like mushrooms. If mushrooms are put in the dark and have large amounts of dirt shovelled over them, they grow very large. If the dirt is removed and the room flooded with light, the mushrooms cannot flourish and eventually wither and die. Stereotypes are like that – they cannot stand up to the light of enquiry and only flourish in the darkness of secrecy and fear.

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Let's now look at 'prejudice':

Prejudice: preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

For example, a person may hold prejudiced views towards a certain race or gender.

If we break the word down, we get ‘pre-judge’, which is making a judgement without having all the relevant information, or making a judgement based on a stereotype. The judgement is usually negative. It is important to look at what our prejudices are and to explore all parts of ourselves in relation to the prejudice and how it impacts on society and individuals. We can begin by identifying our thoughts and beliefs towards a specific group; then we identify the feelings we have in relation to that group; and, finally, we look at how we behave towards the members of the group. The beliefs and thoughts we hold form the stereotype. The feeling part is whether we like or dislike, whether we feel warmth or hostility towards, the group. The behavioural aspect is how we discriminate against certain groups. It is vital that we identify and explore our prejudicial behaviour and how we discriminate in order to fully understand and work with difference and diversity in helping work.

Discrimination: the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)



If I’m really honest, I have harboured some prejudices towards certain groups of people whose background is different from my own but I don’t think I hurt anyone by having them. I certainly don’t attack anyone or enter into a conflict just because someone is different from me.



Discrimination can be very subtle. There are many ways we can act out our prejudices. Jokes can be very funny but when they make groups of people the butt of the joke this constitutes a form of discrimination. We may gossip or talk about certain types of people or exclude them from our group of friends. This is not always conscious and often happens out of awkwardness and fear rather than direct maliciousness. Also, we can avoid certain groups because of our discomfort and uneasiness around difference and diversity – and this is discrimination. Further up the scale, people can be excluded from various areas of society, including employment and welfare. In extreme cases, certain groups are physically and verbally attacked and, when we look at the worst extreme, genocide can take place.

So it is very clear that we need to identify our prejudices and understand them in order to be able to empathise and understand someone without the shadow of prejudice making this impossible.



I don’t know whether or not that’s possible. I think there will always be certain people, places and things that trigger prejudice in me, but I guess it’s what I do with it that’s important.



Absolutely; the quality and practice of empathy is always ‘a work in progress’. It is important to keep in mind that the goal is progress rather than perfection.

There is another element of this that needs to be taken into consideration. That element is willingness. Sometimes we might not want to understand something; we may find it abhorrent or so against what we believe in or value that we simply don't want to understand and empathise. It is important to be honest with ourselves about the things we are not willing to understand.

COMMUNICATING EMPATHY

ACTIVITY

Imagine you are listening to the following statements. As you read them, consider how you are feeling in relation to the person or the situation. Reflect on how judgemental or accepting you feel. Does the situation/person remind you of anything from your own personal experience? How does this affect how you think or feel about the person/situation?

At the end of each section, there are a number of responses. Identify the one you feel is the most empathic response.

1. I'm really worried that I'm pregnant. I'm too scared to take a test in case I am. I know that sounds awful but I just don't know what I'd do. I've wanted a baby for so long; actually we've wanted a baby for so long. I'm married, you see. We've even considered IVF, we wanted a family so much, and it didn't seem to be happening. The problem is I had sex with a work colleague – only once, but it only takes once, doesn't it? What will I do if I am pregnant? I'd have to tell my partner but that could mean the end for us. What a mess.
 - (a) You need to find out straight away; that's the only way to set your mind at rest.
 - (b) You are in such a difficult situation and are so frightened and unsure of what to do.
 - (c) You are feeling guilty and ashamed for doing such a terrible thing to a loving partner.
 - (d) I had an unwanted pregnancy once. It was so awful; I know exactly what you're going through.
 - (e) You don't know whether to lie or tell the truth.
 - (f) You don't have to tell your partner. Do you think you could keep the secret to yourself?

2. Oh no! I've just seen my rota for next week and I've got three long shifts and an overnight. It had to be this week, didn't it? I don't know what to do. John's dad is in hospital and I have to drive him there three times a week and I've promised the girls I'd do their hair and nails on Wednesday – not to mention everything else that needs doing. The house is a pigsty and all I want to do is crawl into bed and sleep for a week. I'm so stressed. I really am at the end of my tether.
- (a) You sound absolutely exhausted and overwhelmed by all the demands on your time.
 - (b) You are really angry that your family don't appreciate you and treat you so badly.
 - (c) Can you ring work and ask to change your shifts?
 - (d) Oh you poor thing, what a horrendous week; can I do anything to help?
 - (e) Don't get so stressed out, just leave the housework. The dust will still be there tomorrow.
 - (f) How about enrolling on an assertiveness course? Learn to say no!
3. I've just had an argument with my best friend and think the friendship might be over, and it's all my fault. She told me something in confidence and I told my neighbour. I feel so guilty. She found out what I'd done and accused me of betraying her and she's right. She's so angry with me and I don't blame her. I don't even know why I did it. I hate myself.
- (a) What did she say exactly? Did she tell you she didn't want to be your friend?
 - (b) What on earth made you say that? Your poor friend will never be able to trust you again.
 - (c) How sad. You've lost your best friend and all over nothing.
 - (d) You are really hurting. You feel so bad about what's happened and are giving yourself a really hard time for it.
 - (e) Phone her up. I'm sure she'll forgive you. Do you want me to have a word with her for you?
 - (f) My best friend saw me out one evening when I'd told her I was babysitting. That caused a big fight too.

Answers: 1 (b), 2 (a), 3 (d)

So, communicating empathy is about understanding the importance of acknowledging and working with difference and diversity both in ourselves and in others, and working together to try to understand. It takes practice.

ACTIVITY

In everyday life, practise communicating empathy with family and friends. Try not to give advice or offer solutions.

1. Try to find a private space with no distractions and no risk of interruption.
2. Listen without interruption; let the person just talk.
3. Listen to the words but also how the words are communicated, such as the tone of voice and posture; this is especially important if you are on the phone.
4. Be attentive; stay focused on what the person is saying. If your mind wanders, bring it back to what they are saying.
5. Concentrate on your breathing and allow yourself to relax.
6. Use facial expressions to let the person know you are paying attention.
7. Pause and imagine how the person might be feeling.
8. Reflect back to the person what you have heard.
9. Let the person know you understand.
10. Check with the person that your understanding is accurate.
11. Be respectful.

SUMMARY

In order to develop empathy as a helper, you need to:

- Understand the difference between empathy and sympathy.
- Work to understand difference and uniqueness in others.
- Challenge your own prejudices and stereotypes.
- Practise being able to communicate empathy.