

Accurate Empathic Understanding

The ability of the therapist accurately and sensitively to understand experiences and feelings *and their meaning to the client* during the moment-to-moment encounter of psychotherapy constitutes what can perhaps be described as the “work” of the therapist after he has first provided the contextual base for the relationship by his self-congruence or genuineness and his unconditional positive regard.

Accurate empathic understanding means that the therapist is completely at home in the universe of the patient. It is a moment-to-moment sensitivity that is in the “here and now,” the immediate present. It is a sensing of the client’s inner world of private personal meanings “as if” it were the therapist’s own, but without ever losing the “as if” quality. Accurate sensitivity to the client’s “being” is of primary value in the moment-to-moment encounter of therapy; it is of limited use to the individual if the therapist only arrives at this insightful and empathic understanding of the patient’s experience as he drives home at night. Such a delayed empathy or insight may be of value if the therapist has a later chance to respond to the same theme, but its value would lie in formulating his empathic response to the patient’s *immediate* living of the relationship.

The ability and sensitivity required to communicate these inner meanings back to the client in a way that allows these experiences to be “his” is the other major part of accurate empathic understanding. To sense the patient’s confusion, his fear, his anger or his range as if it were a feeling you might have (but which you are not currently having) is the essence of the perceptive aspect of accurate empathy. To communicate this perception in a language attuned to the patient that allows him more clearly to sense and formulate his confusion, his fear, his rage or anger is the essence of the communicative aspect of accurate empathy.

At a high level of accurate empathy the message “I am with you” is unmistakably clear so that the therapist’s remarks fit with the client’s mood and content. The therapist at a high level will indicate not only a sensitive understanding of the apparent feelings but will *by his communication* clarify and expand the patient’s awareness of these feelings or experiences. The communication is not only by the use of words that the patient might well have used, but also by the sensitive play of voice qualities which reflect the seriousness, the intentness, and the depth of feeling.

An accurate empathic grasp of the patient’s conflicts and problems is perhaps most sharply contrasted with the more usual diagnostic formula-lion of the patient’s experiences. This diagnostic understanding which is so different but so common involves the “I understand what is wrong with you” or “I understand the dynamics which make you act that way” approach. These evaluative understandings are external and sometimes even impersonal. While they may at times be very useful in developing external understanding, they are in sharp contrast to an accurate and sensitive grasp of events or experiences and their *personal meaning to the client*. The external and evaluative understanding tends to focus the client’s being on externals or upon intellectualizations which remove him from an ongoing contact with the deeper elements of his self...

... The empathic understanding when it is accurately and sensitively communicated seems crucially important in making it possible for a person to get close to himself, to experience his most inward feelings, to maintain contact with his inner self-experiences, thus allowing for the recognition and resolution of incongruences. It is this self-exploration and consequent recognition and resolution of incongruities that we believe allows the client to change and to develop his potentialities.

Though the accuracy of understanding is central, the communication of intent to understand can in itself be of value. Even the confused, inarticulate, or bizarre individual, if he perceives that the therapist is *trying* to understand his meanings, will be helped because he will be encouraged to communicate more of his self. The very effort to understand communicates to the patient the value placed on him as an individual, thus conveying an element of unconditional positive regard. It gets across the fact that the therapist perceives his feelings and meanings as being *worth* understanding. It is in this sense that the intent to be empathic is of value. If the intent should continue without actualization, however, there is the possibility that it could become harmful. That is, if as a therapist I am consistently unable to understand the inarticulate or bizarre individual, he may become even more hopeless about the possibility of ever communicating himself.

There are many ways in which the therapist can communicate a low level of accurate empathic understanding. The therapist may be off on a tangent of his own, or may have misinterpreted what the patient is feeling, or may be so preoccupied and interested in his own intellectual interpretations of the client's behavior that he is scarcely aware of the client's "being." He may have his focus of attention on the intellectual content of what the client says rather than what the client "is" during the moment, and so ignores, misunderstands, or does not attempt to sense the client's current feelings and experiences.

The common element in a low level of empathy involves the therapist's doing something other than "listening" or "understanding"; he may be evaluating the client, giving advice, offering intellectual interpretations, or reflecting upon his own feelings or experiences. Indeed, a therapist may be accurately describing psychodynamics to the patient, but in a language not that of the client, or at a time when these dynamics are far removed from the current feelings of the client, so that there is a flavor of teacher-pupil interaction.

At a relatively low level of empathic sensitivity the therapist responds with clarity only to the patient's most obvious feelings. At an intermediate level, the therapist usually responds accurately to the client's more obvious feelings and occasionally recognizes some that are less apparent, but in the process of tentative probing, he may anticipate feelings which are not current or may misinterpret the present feelings. At a higher level the therapist is aware of many feelings and experiences which are not so evident but his lack of complete understanding is shown by the slightly inaccurate nature of his deeper responses. At this level he is simply "pointing" to some of the more hidden feelings. He is aware of their existence and so points to them but he is not yet able to grasp their meaning. At a very high level of empathic understanding the therapist's responses move, with sensitivity and accuracy, into feelings and experiences that are only hinted at by the client...

... At this level, underlying feelings or experiences are not only pointed to but they are specifically identified so that the content that comes to light may be new but it is not alien. At this high level the therapist is sensitive to his own tentative errors and quickly alters or changes his responses in midstream, indicating a clear but fluid responsiveness to what is being sought after in the patient's own explorations. The therapist's words reflect a togetherness with the patient and a tentative trial-and-error exploration while his voice tone reflects the seriousness and depth of his empathic grasp.

It is this sensitive and accurate grasp and communication of the patient's inner world that facilitates the patient's self-exploration and consequent personality growth.