

# News from Counselling Training Liverpool



## Exploring the 5 Levels of Empathy

**Empathy** is a term that in person centred counselling training is talked about at every twist and turn. It is often described as walking in another person's shoes, entering into another person's frame of reference or having the ability to experience life as the other person does, by entering the person's world of thoughts, feelings, emotions and meanings. However, more so in counselling, empathy is an expression of the regard and respect the Counsellor holds for the Client whose experiences may be quite different from that of the Counsellor.

The Client needs to feel "held", understood, as well as respected. To hold a Client therapeutically means the Counsellor is capable to accept and support the Client through any issues, concerns, problems she/he brings. The ability to empathise with another is enhanced by being attentive to facial expressions, body language, gestures, intuition, silences etc. Is it like Sympathy? No. Not at all. Sympathy is not empathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone. When we feel sympathy for someone we might view them with pity. While pity makes a victim of the sufferer, empathy empowers them: "It's like ...." "I have a sense of your world, you are not alone, we will go through this together".

**There are Five Levels of Empathy** (Truax and Carkhuff 1967 Communication Scale)

- Level 1 - low level (little or no awareness of feeling).
- Level 2 - moderately low level (some awareness).
- Level 3 - reciprocal level of empathic responding (accurate reflection of client's message reflected at the level in which it was given - paraphrasing with the appropriate feeling word).
- Level 4 - moderately high level of empathic responding (reflecting not only the accurate feeling but the underlying feeling).
- Level 5 - high level of empathic responding (accurate reflection of feeling, plus underlying feelings in greater breadth and depth (also for some interpretation such as a deep disappointment or long range goals).

**Let's take an example: Read this statement and think about how you would respond.**  
**"University is awful. I don't know why I came here. My life back home was a lot more fun."**

Now look at the 5 levels of response in relation to this statement:-

- **Level One:** "You worry too much. You have to remember that university isn't the same as college."
- **Level Two:** "I can see that you are upset, but you'll adjust after a while."
- **Level Three:** "You're really unhappy here at university."
- **Level Four:** "It sounds like you are not only disappointed with your university experience, but you are also feeling homesick."
- **Level Five:** "It's clear you're disappointed. Your experience at university is not what you expected to be. I'm wondering if you're feeling a little self-doubt regarding your decision. It sounds like this disappointment has stirred up a lot of conflicting feelings for you about where you're heading."

**Carl Rogers (1969), the founder of person centred counselling explains Empathy.**

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To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another's world, without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self and this can only be done by a person who is secure enough in himself that he knows he will not get lost in what may turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and can comfortably return to his own world when he wishes. Perhaps this description makes clear that being empathic is a complex, demanding, strong yet subtle and gentle way of being.

Carl Rogers (1967) On becoming a person.