

Elements of Empathic Listening

Presence

This element of empathy for me is about conscious awareness that transcends thought/thinking, and listening from the heart, from the place in me that feels unconditional care and regard for all human beings and all life. In empathy, I am placing my pure, witnessing attention on the other person, gently and effortlessly resting my awareness on what I'm receiving from them without thinking about or trying to understand what they are saying. In doing this I am also frequently shifting my attention very briefly back to what is happening inside me, to maintain my own self-connection, and then returning my attention back to being fully with the other person.

Understanding/Meaning

This element of empathy for me is about attempting to understand someone in the way they would most like to be heard, in the language that best reflects what they are trying to communicate about what is true for them, in their world, their reality. It is the attempt to receive someone exactly where they are in terms of the meaning to them of their experience, going with the language that they feel is best connecting/resonating to the life within them.

This is not agreement. You may not agree with what someone is saying or even perceive the same reality they do. It is about demonstrating understanding and acceptance of another's subjective frame of reference, focusing our attention toward the another and attempting to articulate back to them what is true for them in their subjective world. This may involve reflecting back to the person some of their judgmental thoughts and their story, but to do this in a way that does not support the idea of an external truth or reality but rather maintaining the focus on this person's internal frame and what would help them feel heard and understood as they would like.

Need Language & Deepening into Needs

This element is about focusing our listening attention and verbal reflection on the needs alive in this person as they are speaking, and connecting their needs to their observations, thoughts, feelings and specific wants. It may be a matter of reflecting back the needs we are hearing in what the person is already expressing, or we as listener may want to attempt to translate their thoughts and guess the needs we are sensing.

Once we have connected with the person's needs, we may wish to linger a bit on those needs, pausing to "savor" them with the person, either in silence or continuing to reflect the needs back, perhaps in slightly different aspects or nuances of the words that seem to resonate most strongly and deeply with the person. This is a way of making the space for ourselves and the person to more deeply connect with the life within them.

EMPATHY QUOTES

Empathy as Presence

“The Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tzu stated that true empathy requires listening with the whole being: ‘The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of the understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear, or to the mind. Hence it demands the emptiness of all the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind.’”

- *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*

Listen.....

I do not know if you have ever examined how you listen, it doesn't matter to what, whether to a bird, to the wind in the leaves, to the rushing waters, or how you listen in a dialogue with yourself, to your conversation in various relationships with your intimate friends, your wife or husband....

If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our backgrounds, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate we hardly listen at all to what is being said....

In that state there is no value at all. One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence, in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems to me, it is possible to communicate.

...real communication can only take place where there is silence.

-- *Krishnamurti*

Surfing Life Energy and Watching the Magic Show

Have you ever been surfing? Imagine you're on your surfboard now, waiting for the big one to come. Get ready to get carried with that energy. Now, here it comes. Are you with that energy right now? That's empathy. No words – just being with that energy. When I connect with what's alive in another person, I have feelings similar to when I'm surfing.

To do this, you can bring in nothing from the past. So the more psychology you've studied, the harder it will be to empathize. The more you know the person, the harder it will be to empathize. Diagnoses and past experiences can instantly knock you off the board. This doesn't mean denying the past. Past experiences can stimulate what's alive in this moment. But are you present to what was alive *then* or what the person is feeling and needing in *this* moment?

If you think ahead to what to say next – like how to fix it or make the person feel better – BOOM! Off the board. You're into the future. Empathy requires staying with the energy that's here right now. Not using any technique. Just being present. When I have really connected to this energy, it's like I wasn't there. I call this “watching the magic show.” In this presence, a very precious energy works through us that can heal anything, and this relieves me from my “fix-it” tendencies.

- *Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.*