

Psychotherapy Guidebook

DYNAMIC EMPATHY TRAINING

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Dynamic Empathy Training

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DEFINITION

Dynamic Empathy Training uses group simulation exercises to stimulate participants to experience emotions similar to those experienced by others. This enlarges that resource of personal experience in which one can find and reflect feelings and meanings similar to what another person feels and means.

The various definitions of empathy include two dimensions: cognitive and emotional. Empathy denotes not only understanding but also acceptance — acceptance without identification. However, there is a third element: what makes progress possible for the client is not that he is understood and accepted, but that he perceives himself to be understood and accepted.

To influence the empathic process it is necessary to know not just what it is but also how it occurs. Gordon, in his text, *Interviewing*, points out that the extent to which one can understand the feelings of another depends on: 1) the completeness and accuracy of one's knowledge of the other, 2) the extent to which one has experienced the same or similar situations as the other, and

3) the degree to which one has accurately observed, remembered, or imagined his own past experiences. To this must be added 4) the clarity of response that conveys understanding and acceptance to the other person. The difficulty, as Gordon points out, lies in the likelihood of similarity — from the universal aspects of biological behavior to the individual aspects of personal behavior. Therefore improving one's ability to empathize requires at least an increase in the likelihood of similarity of experience — especially with respect to negative and unpleasant aspects of the personal behavior of the other person, for which that person needs to feel understood and accepted.

While one may increase the ability to know what someone means, by reading and by other vicarious experiences, it is unlikely that an appreciation of what someone feels, certainly at the level of advanced accurate empathy, comes about without directly experiencing those emotions. Therefore a comprehensive training process to improve empathic responding must include expanding emotional experiences, and emotional experiences can be expanded through experiential training.

Succinctly then, Dynamic Empathy Training attempts to:

1. Train accurate perceiving of what another person feels and means in his personal experiences.

2. Train accurate observing and recalling of one's own feeling experiences.
3. Expand one's emotional experience repertoire.
4. Broaden one's "acceptance threshold" with respect to the experiences of others.
5. Train effective reflecting of one's understanding and acceptance toward another.
6. Help block identification with another's feelings and experiences.

HISTORY

Group training processes that predated group psychotherapy emphasized intellectual content and processes. Later group psychotherapy also incorporated psychological principles of personal adjustment and growth. Many early group processes, as in psychodrama, gestalt, and encounter groups, involved empathic responding among participants. However, empathy training is not the primary function of these processes.

Recently, specific attention has been given to empathy training in counselor and therapist training. However, the focus has been piecemeal, largely emphasizing cognitive and communicative aspects. In 1952, Carl Rogers suggested an exercise in which an individual would repeat his understanding of the other person's statement before responding to it.

Carkhuff (1969) identified and systematized the components of the helping interaction, including specific empathic responding. In typical workbook exercises by Gazda (1973), Danish and Hauer (1975), Jerome Kagan (1969), and Egan (1975), trainees select or compose the most appropriate empathic response, or role play a counseling dialogue emphasizing specific empathic techniques. Ivey's approach in micro-counseling is a live approach of the same type. The emphasis in these training forms is clearly on communication skills; there is no attempt to expand one's repertoire of emotional experience, to broaden one's range of acceptance, or to inhibit identification.

It is apparent that empathy is generally considered an observable characteristic of interpersonal behavior that is measurable (at least as a cognitive and communicative process) and modifiable through training. In contrast, Dynamic Empathy Training draws heavily on modern dynamic group processes because they are experiential, growth oriented, and primarily affective (dealing with moods and emotions) process-learning situations that focus on changes within the learner.

TECHNIQUE

Step 1: Needs and strength assessment. The trainees write responses to the phrase "Someone could help me with..." After the trainer reads them aloud, the trainees individually respond to the phrase "I could help someone

with ...” The trainees then discuss their reactions to receiving or not receiving help, selecting or rejecting areas for helping. Throughout this exercise the trainer notes evidenced needs and strengths.

Step 2: The group is presented with someone’s personal experience that has a single, emotional theme — rejection, for example. The presentation, which lasts only a minute or two, can be staged, in person, written, or with video or audio recordings. Then each trainee responds to the phrase “This person feels...” The inadequacy and confusion of naming an emotion becomes obvious. A typical problem solving exercise then follows to describe the emotion in terms of its operational processes and its correlate concrete behavior.

Step 3: Discovering one’s own similar emotions. The trainees sit in a circle and each responds to “I feel rejected when...” The responses are continued until exhausted. Other phrases are introduced in turn and pursued in the same manner to broaden the awareness of the feeling. Dialogue between trainees provides an opportunity for practice of those reflective probes that are helpful at clarifying and understanding the feelings of another person.

Step 4: Intensifying and expanding one’s feeling repertoire. Personal emotional awareness is intensified and new emotional experiences are

created by various experiential interaction exercises. An example is a guided fantasy reinforced by popular music on the same emotional theme or by the projection of a slide, during which the trainees are asked to imagine in turn the other person with these feelings, oneself with these feelings, being together with the other person during the feeling experience, and finally, leaving the other person alone with these feelings. Emphasis is placed on both imaginative and physical experience.

Many standard interaction exercises can simulate unpleasant emotions; others, designed to simulate positive experience, can be varied to simulate just the opposite. A group can also devise original interaction exercises that simulate the emotions in one another.

Step 5: Skill in reflecting emotional awareness. The exercises of heightened emotional experience are extended into reflecting responses by having each trainee extend an appropriate nonverbal response to one another. (This response will also allay the unpleasant emotional experiences of the exercise.) The trainees then in turn address one other trainee by completing the phrase "You are feeling . . ." These responses should progress from inclusion of those aspects of the emotion previously mentioned in the presentation (primary accurate empathy) to expressions that include aspects not previously mentioned (advanced accurate empathy).

Step 6: Evaluation. Before conclusion, the trainees process what has transpired. Individual reactions will be one source of evaluation. The other source lies in the observed comparison of earlier responses with concluding responses for the accuracy and depth of those responses, the number of responses, and the number of trainees responding.

Trainees should enter into these emotional experiences with sufficient bodily involvement to indicate acceptance of the feeling as their own. In accepting the feeling as a legitimate feeling for oneself is found the beginning of accepting that feeling in another person. By abruptly ending the self-perception phase of each exercise and returning to a perception of that feeling in the other person there is a tendency to block identification. In observing reflecting responses, the trainer should discourage indications of identification (use of “I” or “we”) and emphasize the use of the word “you.”

APPLICATIONS

Dynamic Empathy Training has its most extensive application — as part of a comprehensive training program — in helping skills or human-relations training for therapists, counselors, and social workers. Variations of Dynamic Empathy Training can be useful 1) in such areas as cross-cultural training, role conflict, and consciousness raising, 2) in individual and group therapy, where clients are having difficulty in appreciating, accepting, or reflecting the

feelings of others — as in marital conflict and sexual dysfunction, and 3) in assisting patients who present problems of low or inappropriate emotional reactions.

Because of the intensity of the group experience, especially with regard to painful and unpleasant emotions, this is not a training technique that can be used without serious consideration given to the readiness of the trainees and the expertise of the trainer.