



Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

Session 1:

Using Empathic Listening and Reflections to Manage Boundaries

Purpose: This session offers exercises for Helpers to practice accurate empathy that supports maintaining better boundaries.

FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS



Have your phone ready to keep time during the exercise in this session. The exercise takes about 18 minutes total (3 rounds, 6 minutes each).

It can be useful for the trainer to use reflective listening statements in all the debriefing activities. Getting more comfortable with reflective listening is a matter of doing it! See how it goes and take in the feedback. When it's right, people will keep talking, if you get it wrong, they will likely correct you which is A-OK.

STARTING A SESSION:

- ▶ Note: Throughout Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook, we use the terms "Helper" to describe professionals working in the behavioral healthcare field, often in community-based settings, who are supporting individuals in addressing substance use, mental health, or co-occurring conditions. At times, we use the term "Helpee" to describe the individuals the Helper is working with. We chose to do this so that the lessons in the workbook can be used by a wide variety of professionals who live, work, and play in the same community of the people they serve.
- ▶ Prepare yourself for the meeting: Take some time to review and think about the session purpose. Do you have any examples or useful stories to share on the topic?

- ▶ Prepare the room for the meeting: Arrive 20-30 minutes early to arrange the room. If possible, put chairs in a circle large enough so everyone can easily find a seat. Have pens and paper available just in case someone wants to take notes.
- ▶ Start the meeting: As people arrive, be sure to make eye contact and say hello, greeting them by name if you've met before. Start the meeting on time or within 5 minutes of the designated start time. A simple "Let's get started" or "It's 5 minutes after the hour, why don't we begin the meeting" works great.
- ▶ Give introductions and information: Introduce yourself briefly, the overall purpose of the session series (Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress) and the purpose of the session.

FACILITATOR:



Summarize (10 minutes): Give examples of how miscommunications happen in your own work or solicit examples from the group. Notice and debrief how the roadblocks to listening put the Helper in the position of having to do so much more of the work than the people they are working with.

What we really want is for the Helper to listen to the person they are helping. Reminding the Helper that this person has the drivers for change. By listening, we honor this AND their ability to make the change. Active listening makes it less likely that we will fall into the traps that have **US** doing so much more of the work.

This 3-part exercise steps us closer and closer to being able to offer statements that DISPLAY our empathy. When Helpees feel understood, they are better able to do the hard work of changing rather than having to defend the status quo. When the person we are working with feels the need to defend themselves, it's harder work for the Helper.



Exercise (20 minutes): Have participants get into groups of three. Provide Instructions for the group.

Instructions: In a group of 3, decide who will be the listener, the speaker, and the observer. Assure them that throughout this 3-part exercise, everyone will take a turn with each role, switching roles about every 6 minutes. Prepare the group to get into triads.

ROUND 1 (6 MINUTES)



Speaker Role (choose a topic from the list below to share with the Listener and Observer):

- ▶ What was it like growing up in my house
- ▶ Ways in which I have changed as a person over the years
- ▶ Good things and not so-good things about my high school years
- ▶ What I hope and plan to do over the next 10 years
- ▶ Describe someone you are close to

Listener Role: Your job is to listen. ONLY listen. Not making a single sound. Absolute silence. Nonverbal skills are encouraged. Let your speaker know you're listening.

Observer Role: Take this in. What is your experience of being present? Watching the speaking and the listening.

Group Facilitator brings everyone's attention back to the large group to debrief.



Debrief as a large group: Ask the listeners to reflect on their experience first. They were the ones doing the hardest work, although the speakers did work hard. It's not easy to talk about yourself. It's likely that the listeners will notice that they had to suppress the urge to ask questions. Invite the speakers to speak about how they knew that the listener was listening even though they weren't speaking. They will likely validate that they felt listened to.



ROUND 2: SWITCH ROLES (6 MINUTES)

Speaker Role (Chooses a topic from the list below):

- ▶ What was it like growing up in my house
- ▶ Ways in which I have changed as a person over the years
- ▶ Good things and not so-good things about my high school years
- ▶ What I hope and plan to do over the next 10 years
- ▶ Describe someone you are close to

Listener Role: Your job is to listen and encourage the speaker with verbal encouragers such as "Hmm-hmm", or other vocal sounds.

Observer Role: Take this in. What is your experience of being present? Watching the speaking and the listening.

Group Facilitator brings everyone's attention back to the large group to debrief.



Debrief as a large group: Again, ask the listeners to reflect on their experience first. Also, invite the speakers to share how they knew that the listener was listening via the verbals and non-verbals.



ROUND 3: SWITCH ROLES (6 MINUTES)

Speaker role (chooses a topic from the list below):

- ▶ What was it like growing up in my house
- ▶ Ways in which I have changed as a person over the years
- ▶ Good things and not so-good things about my high school years
- ▶ What I hope and plan to do over the next 10 years
- ▶ Describe someone you are close to

Listener Role: Your job is to listen and encourage the speaker by reflecting. To do this, listen and then offer up a reflection of what you think the person is saying. Don't be afraid to go deep- go beyond their words into the meaning behind those words. Is there an unexpressed emotion? Reflecting that back can be very powerful in terms of conveying empathy. *See list of "Reflection Starters" at the end of this document.

It can feel strange to offer reflections on what you think people are telling you- rather than asking questions. It SEEMS like asking questions is more person-centered but reflective statements work better. You don't have to use fancy reflective listening techniques; just starting your response with "You" works really well. As a matter of fact, "You" will have people feeling more listened to than the age-old, worn-out, "what I hear you saying is that you".

Observer Role: Take this in. What is your experience of being present? Watching the speaking and the listening—this time with reflections.

Facilitator brings everyone's attention back to the large group to debrief.



Debrief as a large group: Again, ask the listeners to reflect on their experience first. Also, invite the speakers to speak about how they knew that the listener was listening via the verbals, non-verbals and now the additional reflections.



SESSION DEBRIEF

Discuss ways offering reflections can help to maintain boundaries in the Helper-Helpee relationship.

- ▶ Learning to set aside your own perspectives and wisdom for the time being. Being skillful with reflections reduces the mental load and assures the Helpee that you are really hearing them.
- ▶ Focus on what the Helpee is experiencing without making it your own.
- ▶ Using reflections to communicate accurate empathy allows us to not take on or modify the Helpee's experiences

Examples of Reflective Listening Starters

You're wondering if...	You want...	You're feeling
You're hoping...	Almost as if...	You need...
You're finding...	It seems to you that...	From your point of view...
For you it's a matter of...	You're wondering if...	You...
This has actually been totally...	In other words, you're saying...	Like a...