

# Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

## Session 2:

### Acceptance: Doing Less Work

**Purpose:** This session offers exercises to reduce defensiveness and conflict in Helper-Helpee relationships.

#### FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS



Facilitators should continue to use reflective listening statements in the large group debrief and model skillfulness around emphasizing autonomy and affirming. Continue to genuinely reinforce that they arrived at the session with many skills for reducing tension.

#### 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 of 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 set. 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.
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- ▶ Give introductions and information: Introduce yourself briefly, the overall purpose of the session series (Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress) & the purpose of the session.

## FACILITATOR:



**Summarize (8 minutes):** This session will focus on the thoughts and behaviors that create tension in our relationships. We'll discuss thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that contribute to defensiveness and consider how strengthening, altering, or adding to our existing skills can help with this.

Thinking about session 1: You were invited to listen and reflect on what your partner was saying. In that situation, the speaker was asked to speak about something that didn't have a right or wrong answer. That was deliberate.

### Resist the urge to fix

It is MUCH MORE challenging to listen when a person is speaking about a topic where there might be a right or wrong—things like quitting or cutting down on their use of alcohol or other drugs, leaving an abusive partner, taking medications as prescribed for a physical or mental health condition. It's one thing when the person is talking about changing these things; that's easy on our ears and heart. But what about when the person is talking about all the reasons why they can't change?

That is harder for us to hear, and we quite naturally want to FIX THEM! It's our Fixing Reflex- that desire to set things straight, to set people on a path toward a better life. After all, that's why we do this work, to help people get OUT of PAIN, CHAOS, and MADNESS!

### Collaborate for success

When we do the thing that we're naturally inclined to do—FIX—people PUSH BACK and get defensive. It's human nature.

Here's the thing: we have to calm that fixing reflex, or it will backfire. We don't have to extinguish our passion for helping people. We just have to reallocate our energy to a place that doesn't cause them to NOT CHANGE.

One of the most crucial aspects of this comes from what we think and feel. When we TRULY believe that the person sitting across from us is our PARTNER and we ACCEPT that they have what they need to make good on their intentions, we ACT and TALK differently than when we think that the person can't possibly get better on their own without our help and strict guidance.

**Should we work on this? Would that be OK? What questions do you have before we start on this?**



**Introspection (5 minutes):** Think about a time where you approached a situation from the place of being the expert. In this situation, you were likely tempted to give the person lots of information and options re: how and why they should make a change.

- How did the person you were helping respond?
- What assumptions were you making about this person?
- Most importantly, think about the message that was sent to the person you were working with.

## FACILITATOR



**Exercise 5 minutes):** Have participants get into groups of three. Provide Instructions for the group.

**Instructions:** Generate a list of things you can think and feel in order to see the person across from you as not needing fixing. Record your ideas and be prepared to share with the large group.



**Debrief as a large group (5 minutes):** Solicit results from small groups and write them on a piece of flipchart paper or a whiteboard.

So, how can we DO these things? To benefit the people we work with, we have to translate our thinking and big heart feelings into words.

Here are some things you can do to express (mention items recorded on the flip chart paper or whiteboard.)



**Summarize (10 minutes):**

**CHOICE:** Reinforce the idea that it's ultimately their choice. 100%. While there may be fewer desirable consequences on the non-change side of the argument, it's STILL THEIR CHOICE.

Say to the person you are working with, Ultimately what happens here is 100% up to you. You know yourself better than anyone else.

**STRENGTHS:** Seeing the strengths in the person you are working with and acknowledging them without judgment or praise helps people realize they DO have what it takes. They have done hard things; they have values and characteristics that help them on their journey toward something different.

### Notice their qualities, values, and achievements and say things like this:

The way that you continue to show up here shows that you're willing to continue working on meeting your goals.

Vs.

I am so proud of you! (This response sounds like you're in CHARGE and creates a hierarchy in the relationship!)

You mentioned several times that your kids are really important to you. The way you are working at this shows how much you love them and want better for them.

Vs.

Do it for your kids!

What other things have you done that are this hard? What strengths do you bring to this?

These questions convey the idea that YOU KNOW they've got all sorts of good stuff inside that will help them through. Help them shine a light on it.

Be empathic when they talk about being stuck. Don't dwell on it, AND accept that it's where they are, while holding out hope that they can change.

Say: You're seeing lots of obstacles to [improved mental/physical health], and yet you're here working on it!

Finally, keep in mind that whoever you are working with deserves our loving kindness simply due to their humanity. No matter who they are and what they've done, people deserve help.



**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 interviewer, the speaker, and the observer. Assure them that throughout this 3-part exercise, everyone will take turns with each role, switching roles every 6 minutes.

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## ROUND 1 (6 MINUTES)



### Speaker Role

- ▶ Talk about a change that you've wanted to make but that's been hard.  
Ways in which I have changed as a person over the years

### Interviewer Role:

We're building on the listening and reflecting skills from Session 1.  
Your job here is to: **NOT FIX!**

- ▶ Listen
- ▶ Reflect
- ▶ Mention choice
- ▶ Recognize and talk about the person's strengths

### Observer Role:

- ▶ Notice how and what the interviewer does and write down a few examples to share with the hardworking interviewer when they are done.
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## ROUND 2

Switch roles. Complete the same exercise in your new roles.

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## ROUND 3

Switch roles. Complete the same exercise in your new roles.

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



**Debrief as a large group:** What did you notice about how these strategies HELP reduce defensiveness and tension?

**Session Debrief:** Discuss ways the fixing reflex gets in the way of authentic support and how we can communicate unconditional support to the person we are working with, regardless of their willingness to change.

- ▶ Communicate acceptance of how the person is right now, not in a future state.
- ▶ Acknowledge potential reluctance without judgment or criticism.
- ▶ Ask permission to give advice or resources.