

Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

Session 5: Keeping Your Eyes on the Horizon

Purpose: This session offers exercises on using shared decision-making to set and maintain focus.



FACILITATOR

Facilitate the scenarios in the exercise as a large group activity. Ask for two volunteers: one will play the role of Helper, and the other will role-play the person they are working with. Then read the scenario to the group and invite the volunteers to try to genuinely take on the roles, expressing the tones and emotions involved as authentically as possible without going overboard.

Starting a Session:

- ▶ **Note:** Throughout this 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 Empathetic Distress) and the purpose of the session.



Summarize (5 minutes):

Set and maintain progress on goals. This mantra has been directed at Helpers plenty of times. When a person initiates any change, such as coming into recovery or making a significant lifestyle change to diet or exercise, the to-do list of potential areas for change and growth may seem endless. Both the Helper and Helpee may be wondering where to start.

If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. — Lewis Carroll

As Helpers, it is not uncommon to find ourselves spending most of our meeting time talking about new and urgent issues (putting out fires) *each time* we meet with a person we're working with. We also might find ourselves working with someone who doesn't seem all that interested in making changes, yet both of you likely recognize that something needs to change (ambivalence). Ambivalence can be exhausting for the Helper: spending every session dealing with the crises, then jumping into problem-solving for one crisis after another. We might find that we make no progress towards bigger goals or unable to identify goals at all.

When we take a moment to set the focus of the conversation, it's likely to be a lot more productive by keeping your eyes on the prize. The goal of focusing is to collaborate on finding the conversation focus— in other words, use shared-decision making to set and maintain focus.



Discuss as a large group (5 minutes): How do you balance the need to address immediate issues while still working towards bigger goals?

Facilitator:

REFLECT AND RESPOND to ideas shared in the group. ASK permission to share a bit of the information below.



Summarize (10 minutes):

There are several ways to set focus:

- ▶ The setting determines the focus. For example, if a sign at room entrance states Smoking Cessation it's easy to set focus because that's the mission of that location. You'd not likely go there if you were seeking to change how you parent your children.
- ▶ The person you are working with sets the focus (not on a crisis) and has a strong interest in working on one particular goal. Sometimes sobriety or a reduction in use isn't what the person wants to work on first. IF they really want to work on employment, we can start there. But what if you disagree? You can suggest a different starting place (see next bullet point). In the end, you might find you can leverage their success for other goals. Or, at the very least, use lessons learned to discuss changing the initial target.
- ▶ The Helper assists in setting and maintaining the focus. As an experienced person, Helpers have a really good sense about where a person might start. We can offer that as a starting point while respecting that what we think and what the person thinks might differ.

Questions to ask yourself:

- ▶ Do I have a clear sense of focus?
- ▶ Do I know the direction in which I hope change occurs?
- ▶ What goal(s) do we have for change, and to what extent do we agree about them?

Let's consider how this shows up in our work and how we might increase our awareness and skillfulness to keep us oriented toward productive, goal-oriented conversations.

When the person we are working with is unfocused, they are likely to:

- ▶ Cover too many topics
- ▶ Not focus on a specific change
- ▶ Seem overwhelmed and discouraged about making a change

Here are some strategies Helpers can use to set and maintain direction:

1. **Seeking collaboration:** Asking permission to talk about a particular topic

Example: Would it be OK if we spent some time today talking about how things have been going in your relationship with Jack?

2. **Seeking or refocusing on a particular topic** if the conversation drifts into other or many topic areas.

Example: So, we agreed to talk about your relationship with Jack. It seems like you're also really troubled by what's been happening at work. Should we shift topics and talk about that, or would you like to return to talking about your relationship?

3. **Emphasize autonomy:** Emphasize the person's right to choose their own path and make their own decisions.

Example: This is 100% your choice, and only you can decide what you want to do.

This one seems obvious. After all, we all know people get to choose what's right for them. What's harder to remember is that when we TELL people this, they are more likely to feel free to consider changing. It's a funny sort of thing.

The people we work with can choose change, or they can choose to stay the same. Sometimes staying the same comes with what might result in huge losses: relationships, money, housing, health, children, or life. It is still a person's right to decide for themselves.

Now, let's apply these skills: Seeking collaboration, seeking or refocusing on a particular topic, and emphasizing autonomy.



Exercise (15 minutes): Complete this exercise as a large group. For each scenario, ask for two volunteers; one to play the Helper role and one to play the role of the person receiving help.

Instructions: As a large group, we are going to take a look at three scenarios. We will role-play each scenario and then pause to discuss what went well and what we could do differently. We will keep our attention on how to honor shared-decision making while maintaining focus on the chosen goal. Who would like to volunteer to play the Helper? Who would like to volunteer to play the person receiving help?

I will start by reading the scenario to the group and then our volunteers will start the role-play.

Scenario 1



Jane (the Helper) and Jack (the person receiving help) have met 3 times. Jane feels like she and Jack have established a solid, trusting relationship. At the end of the third meeting, Jane and Jack set a goal to work on finding housing. Jack is really excited to get started.

When they meet next, Jack shows up obviously flustered and irritated.

Invite one participant to read Jane and another to read Jack.

Jane: Hi, so happy to see you again. How have things been going?

Jack: Not great. I ran into my ex, and he was with his new boyfriend. Even though he didn't say anything directly to me, the new boyfriend kept looking at me sideways. He would barely even let my ex talk to me.

Jane: You were a bit surprised to see them—got you a little stirred up.

Jack: Yeah. I mean I've been working hard to forget about him. I haven't seen him in a while and this just brought up a lot of stuff.

Jane: You endured this intense situation, and you kept your cool.

Jack: Yeah, I did, you're right.



Discuss as a large group: What would you say next to bring this conversation back into focus? How might you use the skills of seeking collaboration, seeking or refocusing on a particular topic, or emphasizing autonomy to help in this situation?

What do you all think about the response below?

Jane: Youve been working hard on keeping your emotions from getting the better of you and it worked out really well in this situation. I'm wondering, the last time we talked we agreed to work on your housing situation. Would it be okay if we spent some time talking about finding an apartment?

Summarize: In this response, Jane respectfully seeks permission from Jack, and together they transition to a more goal-oriented conversation.

Instructions: Who would like to volunteer to play Jane (the Helper)? Who would like to volunteer to play Jake (the person receiving help)?

I will start by reading the scenario to the group and then our volunteers will start the role-play.

Scenario 2



Jane and Jack have met 3 times. Jane feels like they have established a solid, trusting relationship with Jack. At the end of the third meeting, Jane and Jack set a goal to work on securing housing. Jack is really excited to get started.

When they meet next, Jack shows up obviously flustered and irritated.

Invite one participant to read Jane and another to read Jack

Jane: Hi, so happy to see you again. How have things been going?

Jack: Not great. I ran into my ex, and he was with his new boyfriend. Even though he didn't say anything directly to me, he kept looking at me sideways. He would barely even let my ex talk to me.

Jane: Looking at my notes, we planned on talking about finding you a place to live. Since we don't have much time today, we'd best get started.

Jack: Yeah, fine. I know where I'm not going to look for a place. Can you even believe they are living together?

Jane: Yeah, that doesn't seem right. Where DO you want to look for apartments?

Jack: It's hard to even think about it. That was my neighborhood. I was there long before him.

Jane: Again, if not there, then where? Didn't you say your family is just outside of town? They seem pretty supportive.

Jack: They are, I just don't want to live by them. Then they'd be stopping by all the time. I love my old neighborhood but now HE'S all over the place and I can't see him daily. What am I going to do?



Discuss as a large group: What would you say next? (Reflect responses) What do you think about how this is going? Where did things go wrong? What ideas do you have for fixing this?

Summarize: Things went wrong in Jane's second sentence. While it's important to set focus, Jane did nothing to acknowledge Jack's experience. What resulted is that Jack didn't feel heard and kept talking about it. It's best to reflect on Jack's experience and ASK PERMISSION or SEEK COLLABORATION to move on.

Instructions: Who would like to volunteer to play Kenny (the Helper)? Who would like to volunteer to play Jake (the person receiving help)?

I will start by reading the scenario to the group and then our volunteers will start the role-play.

Scenario 3:



Kenny and Jake are meeting for the second time. Based on Jake's recovery capital assessment, he has a lot of rebuilding to do. Given what you know, Kenny and Jake could discuss housing, getting his driver's license, employment, or work on ways to see his kids every other weekend.

Kenny: Jake, happy to see you again. How are things?

Jake: You know, okay but not great. Seems impossible to find a job without a car. Plus, everyone is hiring for weekends—that's when I have time with my kids.

Kenny: Where have you looked for a job? Have you had any interviews? I can't remember—didn't you say you were working on updating your resume?

Jake: Um.... I tried but... I'm not sure how far back I should go.

Kenny: Well, that's something we need to work on. Did you find an apartment? I sent you to the one up the street from here, remember, I know the landlord. He takes housing assistance. Did you get that application in?

Jake: I'm working on it all...it's a lot. I need a break from this, and I don't even have a job.

Kenny: Ok, so well keep working on finding jobs and getting an apartment. Just go to the guy up the street after our meeting. I have a housing assistance application right here.

Jake: SIGH

Kenny: I know you're busy. I bet you're enjoying time with your kids. That's gotta help you feel better.

Jake: Yes and no. It's good to see them but it sucks that I don't have money or a car.



Discuss as a large group (5 minutes): Ask the group:

- ▶ What would you say next? Reflect responses.
- ▶ What do you think about how this is going?
- ▶ Where did things go wrong?
- ▶ What ideas do you have for fixing this?

Summarize (5 minutes): Things went wrong because Kenny is doing nothing to set focus and is instead just asking closed questions about Jakes progress on multiple items. This approach might check off boxes but is unlikely to support change.



Session Debrief

To take this from the realm of our discussion out into the real world, who has an example of how maintaining focus on a goal is challenging?

- ▶ If someone shares, ask that person if they want advice from the group on how what you've learned might help.

Introspection: Invite participants to think or make a few notes about what they learned.

Ask the group:

- ▶ What are your thoughts about setting and maintaining focus on a particular goal?
- ▶ What might be better for you if you were more intentional about setting focus?



Session Summary

- ▶ The Helper is in charge of maintaining direction towards goals for change and growth. The Helpee brings the content to the conversation, the Helper keeps it moving.
- ▶ Move from everything is wrong to creating a direction for change. We owe it to the people we help to move along. Perpetual discussion of crisis is less likely to result in lasting change. AND its exhausting, for both the Helper and the Helpee.
- ▶ Respectful collaboration is a big part of maintaining direction/focus.