

Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

Session 8: Supporting Each Other Through Challenging Times

Purpose: In this session, we will practice using affirmations and reflections when supporting other Helpers.

Facilitator preparation and considerations



Have your phone ready to keep time during the exercise in this session. The exercise takes about 20 minutes (3 rounds, 6 minutes each). During the small group sessions, walk around the room and listen to the groups as they practice. Be prepared to jump in and offer suggestions if the listener isn't able to offer a reflection or affirmation. Also, listen for groups that might fall into problem-solving and guide them back to the goals of offering reflections, affirmations, and asking open questions when the speaker is stuck.

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.

FACILITATOR:



Summarize (15 minutes):

Give participants a few minutes to read through the section “What is Empathic Distress?” at the beginning of the Facilitator’s Guide.

Today, we are going to use our reflective listening and affirmations skills to practice helping a colleague when they're struggling.

So we are all starting from the same place, let's review what we mean by affirmations and reflective listening:

Affirmations are statements and gestures that recognize another’s strengths and acknowledge behaviors that lead in the direction of positive change, no matter how big or small. Remember, affirmations are not praise. Affirmations affirm a person’s inherent worth, strengths, positive attributes, and past efforts with change.

Reflective listening is simple but not easy. It is when we mirror or reflect back what we hear from the person speaking. It is an opportunity to show the speaker we are wholeheartedly listening and trying our best to understand. As the Helper, we make statements, not ask questions and remember, reflections start with the word “you,” not “I.”

You are likely familiar with the many types of reflections:

- ▶ **Simple reflection:** repeat or rephrase what the person said
- ▶ **Paraphrase:** restatement, which brings an educated guess or inference to add meaning to what the person said.
- ▶ **Feeling:** reflection of implied underlying feeling (name the feeling)

Reflections offer the other person’s content back to them in a non-threatening way, invite them to continue talking or delve deeper, and help them to organize their thoughts.

We are skilled at using affirmations and reflective listening with the people we serve, but we might forget these skills when chatting with a struggling coworker. Using the scenarios below, we will spend some time practicing reflective listening and offering affirmations. The goal of the practice is to listen actively to the speaker and offer two reflections for every open-ended question you ask. You can also offer affirmations that remind the speaker of their past successes, current efforts, struggles and desires, strengths, values, and efforts to act on them.



Exercise (20 minutes): Have participants get into groups of 3-4. Provide instructions for the group.

Instructions: In your group, decide who will be the listener, the speaker, and the observer for the first round. The speaker can choose a role from the “Practice Roles” on the next page, or they can choose to use their own experience. If the speaker chooses a practice role, read the paragraph about the role to your small group before starting. We’ll spend about 6 minutes in each round, repeating the exercise until everyone in the small group has had a turn being the speaker, listener, and observer.

ROUND 1:

Speaker Role: Takes on the role from one of the scenarios or shares a scenario from their own experience. Remember, you are “real playing” a Helper in this role, not someone receiving services.

Listener Role: Takes on the role of a colleague listening to the Helper. Your role here is not to problem solve but really listen and reflect back to the Speaker Role what you are hearing. You can ask open-ended questions and offer affirmations that remind the Speaker Role of their strengths.

Observer Role: Listen to the conversation. Take note if the Speaker Role is offering reflections and affirmations. Take note of the types of questions the Speaker Role is asking (open or closed).

ROUND 2:

Switch roles. The speaker can choose a role from the “Practice Roles” below, or they can choose to use their own experience. If the speaker chooses a practice role, read the paragraph about the role to your small group before starting.

ROUND 3:

Switch roles. The speaker can choose a role from the “Practice Roles” below or they can choose to use their own experience. If the speaker chooses a practice role, read the paragraph about the role to your small group before starting.

Debrief as a large group (15 minutes): What was it like to be the listener? What was it like to be the speaker? What was it like to be the observer?

How did it feel to provide feedback in the observer role?

PRACTICE ROLES

#1: Kyle has been employed as a Helper with XYZ residential treatment center for just over a year. When he first started, he had to explain his role to many of his colleagues. After the first couple of months, Kyle was feeling settled in his role and started to schedule one-to-one meetings with center's clients regularly. Recently, the center's driver quit, and Kyle was asked to fill in until they found someone new. It's been a couple of weeks now, and Kyle is still providing all the client transportation, which is interfering with his ability to meet with clients in his usual sessions. When he brings this up to his supervisor, he is told that "everyone has to chip in when they are short-staffed." He is frustrated, worried, and has come to you to vent.

#2: Mel has been working as a Helper for several years. She left the peer-run organization where she was trained and employed as a Helper to work at a withdrawal management/detoxification facility. During her shift, she was working with a client who was struggling with their self-worth. Mel shared her previous struggles with her own self-worth and how overwhelming those thoughts can be when you are taking steps to get well.

After her shifts, Mel can't stop thinking about the client (they have a lot in common) and how she can help her after she leaves the facility. You meet Mel out for coffee, and she tells you about the person she is working with and her plans to help her.

#3: Aaron has been working as a Helper at a peer drop-in center for several years. He really enjoys the work and interacting with the people who come in. In the past year, Aaron's mom passed away, and now his daughter is struggling in school and might not graduate. You work with Aaron and notice that when he comes in for his shifts, he seems exhausted, easily overwhelmed, disconnected, and unable to concentrate. You find yourself sitting with Aaron over your lunch break, and he starts to share about how tired he is.

#4: Jess is a seasoned Helper with years of experience working in different settings. Jess started a new job at a hospital. In her first week of work, Jess realizes that she is not being included in the team meetings. She asks her supervisor about this and is told team meetings are really just for the clinical staff, and she'd likely get bored if she attended. Jess calls you to talk about how she feels she is being treated unfairly.

Use your own: Group members can bring their own, real-life experiences to practice with. Advise group members to not choose a scenario that they aren't comfortable sharing with the larger group.



Session Debrief: Discuss ways Helpers can support one another by using affirmations and reflections:

- ▶ What was easy about this practice?
- ▶ What was challenging?
- ▶ How can you incorporate these practices with our colleagues?