

Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress

Session 10: Empowering Change in Others

Purpose: Helping peers to unburden themselves from feeling like they're responsible for another person's change. We CAN be in charge of recognizing that people have strengths and their own reasons for change. When we help them express this, they will do better.



FACILITATOR PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

The idea that people have everything they need to make change isn't particularly hard to grasp. It seems simple. With your guidance, the group participants will explore ways to enhance strengths and draw the power to change out of their Helsees.

Quite understandably, the group may want to focus on the most stuck person they can imagine. While some people are really stuck, focusing only on them isn't helpful, and it's certainly not the majority of people. It might be useful to talk about a time when someone told you a reason for change that really surprised you. It highlights the importance of remembering that GOOD reasons are often not what we assume.

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 (2 minutes): Doing all the work and having to have all the answers on why and how to fix problems is exhausting. As we've discussed in other sessions, it's not even that helpful

Discuss as a large group (5 minutes): What happens when WE supply all the ideas for change and tell people what they could, should, or ought to do? What message is that sending to the person we are working with? How does this enhance or discourage their belief in themselves?

Summarize (5 minutes): When we try to fix people or have all the answers, the message the person hears is, "You certainly can't do this alone, so it's good that I'm here to clean this up for you."

When we instead create a partnering space where we acknowledge that people have what they need, they just need to be reminded of their own sense of importance and confidence around making a change.

"People possess substantial personal expertise and wisdom regarding themselves, and tend to develop in a positive direction, given the proper conditions and support..."

- Miller and Moyers, 2006



Discuss as a large group (5 minutes):

How do you highlight someone's strengths and ability to solve their own problems?

What do you hear from the people you work with that sounds like they are considering or are committed to making a change?

Summarize (5 minutes): Examples of some things you might hear might be:

"I want to," "I'd like to," "I can," "I might be able to," "I need to," "I ought to," "My reasons for changing are" ...

When we HEAR and repeat the person's talk about changing, it helps strengthen the concept that it's THEIR talk about change that's important. It lightens our load; we don't have to do all the work.



Discuss as a large group (10 minutes):

What kind of talk about change have you heard lately from the people you work with?

Summarize (10 minutes): Another skill to try is to draw out a person's ideas about how and why the change is important.

1. **Ask them:** (After each question, reflect what the person says.)

- ▶ “What do you want?”
- ▶ “What do you feel should happen?”
- ▶ “What are two or three reasons you’re thinking about making this change?”
- ▶ “If things continue as they are, what would be the worst thing that could happen?”

2. **Reinforce** a person's confidence in making a change.

Noticing a person's strengths and pointing them out —not by praising them but truly noticing their strengths, further empowers people to see they can make the change. The change seems possible.

Say things like:

“The way that you’re working at this shows that you’re brave, willing to be vulnerable, and care a lot about your family.”

“You’ve shown real courage and resourcefulness.”

We can also ask them about how they see their own strengths.

- ▶ “What about you as a person will make this possible?”
- ▶ “What qualities do you have that you can draw upon?”
- ▶ “What other really difficult changes have you made? Maybe you even surprised yourself.”

3. **Share information** or advice about making the change using a partnering style.

Again, when we share without asking, it's as though we have all the answers. That style ends up backfiring, and we get overburdened with the idea that we have information that people must hear in order to make a change. Instead, partner up. This person sitting in front of you has a wealth of knowledge and experience with the world and is the foremost expert on themselves.

Before you share information:

- ▶ Ask what they already know
- ▶ Then, ask permission to share what you want to share with them
- ▶ After you tell them, ask them, “What did you think of that? What surprised you about that? What questions do you have?”

4. **Reinforce** the idea that people are in charge of themselves.

When you say, “You’re in charge of you.”, “You’re the one who will make all the decisions about how you want to proceed.” or “This is your life, and no one can make decisions for you.” That further builds the idea that it’s them, NOT you, who has the power to not change or change. You’re there to help them, but they get to make the decisions.

Discuss as a large group (10 minutes):

How does it benefit the person we work with when we intentionally reinforce the idea that they have what they need to make a change? That we believe that this person has their own thoughts and ideas about changing?

How does it benefit us as the Helper when we intentionally reinforce the idea that they have what they need to make change?



Session Debrief: Invite people to set a goal to use one of the strategies for supporting change you discussed today. Maybe you can all check in at some later point and report out on how it went. What was it like to support change AND NOT tell the person what to do?