



# Recognizing and Preventing Empathic Distress Workbook

## PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

*Kris Kelly, BS*  
*Laura A. Saunders, MSSW*

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Great Lakes ATTC, MHTTC, PTTC  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
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Madison, WI 53705

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# Participant Guide

## Session 1: Using Empathetic Listening and Reflections to Manage Boundaries

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

### EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS

In groups of 3, decide who will be the listener, the speaker, and the observer.



#### 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

**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.



#### 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.



### 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.

### Key Takeaways:

Listen with patience, presence, no judgement, acceptance, and curiosity.

Reflections do the following:

- ▶ Offer the other person's content back to them in a non-threatening way
- ▶ Invite the other person to continue speaking on a topic or delve deeper

## Examples of Reflective Listening Starters

<b>You're wondering if...</b>	<b>You want...</b>	<b>You're feeling...</b>
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...

## Session 2: Acceptance: Doing Less Work

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



**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

### EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS:

In a small group, discuss what has to be in your head and your heart to look at the person you are working with and see something different than a person who can benefit from your FIXING.

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.

### EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS:

In a group of 3, decide who will be the interviewer, the speaker, and the observer.



### 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.

## ROUND 2

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

## ROUND 3

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

### Key takeaways:

- ▶ Listen with patience, presence, no judgement, acceptance, and curiosity.
- ▶ Avoid fixing the problem for the other person.
- ▶ Mention choice: “You’re the one who makes the decisions about how this ends up”, “You know yourself best”, “You’re in charge of yourself”.
- ▶ Recognize strengths: Show appreciation for past successes, future hopes, current efforts, struggles, resiliency, humanity, character, strengths, and personal values.

That took a lot of...	This shows...	You're really...
It must have taken a lot of work to...	What about you would make this possible?	You demonstrated X about yourself.

## Session 3: Responding to Microaggressions in the Workplace

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



**Introspection (5 minutes):** Think about a situation where you or a coworker experienced a microaggression at work related to your role. Was it a microassault, microinvalidation, or microinsult? How did you or the person respond? How did the person who committed the microaggression receive the response? What assumptions were you making about the person who committed the microaggression?

**Exercise Instructions:** In a group of 3, each person takes a turn sharing a microaggression that they or a coworker experienced, along with details of how the situation unfolded. Do your best to use scenarios related to the Helper role. Try to avoid judging or getting sidetracked processing the scenarios.

**Exercise Instructions:** Once everyone has shared, stay in your small groups and write some responses using the formats below. We'll spend about 6-8 minutes crafting responses.

(From Nadal, 2014, pp. 71-76)

- ▶ I know you didn't realize this, but when you \_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because \_\_\_\_\_. Instead, you could \_\_\_\_\_ (different language or behavior) or What would you think about us coming up with another way to do that/express that?
- ▶ I am really curious about why you said \_\_\_\_\_ and want to better understand.
- ▶ I am not sure if you're aware, but I'm receiving what you said like this \_\_\_\_\_. Could you tell me more about the intention behind what you said?
- ▶ What you just said about \_\_\_\_\_ didn't sit right with me. Are you open to talking about it?
- ▶ I think I heard you say \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?
- ▶ Would you be willing to say more about what you meant when you said \_\_\_\_\_?
- ▶ While you didn't intend to convey \_\_\_\_\_, the words you used can send a message that \_\_\_\_\_
- ▶ Even though your intention was \_\_\_\_\_, the person you were talking to may have experienced \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think?



**Exercise Instructions:** Once you've crafted 2-3 responses as a small group, take turns practicing saying the responses with each other.

## Key Takeaways:

Types and Forms of Microaggressions

- ▶ **Microassaults:** Include more traditional acts of overt and intentional acts or communications of discrimination.

**Example:** As a Helper, not being given access to information about the people you work with because of the belief that Helpers can't be trusted with confidential information.

- ▶ **Microinsults:** Largely unintentional behaviors or verbal expressions that convey insensitivity or demean a person based on a marginalized group identity.

**Example:** A clinician says to another colleague, "Let's face it, all addicts lie and manipulate."

- ▶ **Microinvalidation:** May be verbal comments or behaviors that deny or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a marginalized target group.

**Example:** In team meetings, Helpers are not asked for their input when discussing cases.

- ▶ **Microaffirmations:** Acknowledging the contributions of those who are being dismissed or ignored. In other words, give credit to show that you hear and value your coworkers

## Session 4: Placing Yourself Front and Center

### Purpose: Managing Difficult Emotions

**Exercise instructions:** Be empowered to be present with others and their experiences while not owning those feelings.

But what if we are trying to be there for the person and be there with THEIR emotions, and ours just keep coming up?



We'll take 10 minutes for your small group to brainstorm responses to the following questions:

- ▶ What do you or what could you do when your emotions are getting in the way of you being able to be balanced between logic and feeling?
- ▶ What do you do when you're out of balance?

### Key Takeaways:

Science tells us that empathy is:

- ▶ Awareness of the feelings and emotions of other people
- ▶ A key element of emotional intelligence, the link between self and others
- ▶ How we as individuals understand what others are experiencing as if we were feeling it ourselves
- ▶ Not having had the same experience or problem and not telling people our story

## Session 5: Keeping Your Eyes on the Horizon

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

### 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.



### 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?



## 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.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Seeking collaboration:

- ▶ Invite a starting point for the conversation like this: There are lots of things we can talk about today, where would you like to start?
- ▶ If the starting point is less negotiable start like this: “Given what you’re facing, it would seem that a good place for us to start would be X. What questions do you have before we start?”
- ▶ Mention choice: “You’re the one who makes the decisions about how this ends up”, “You know yourself best”, “You’re in charge of yourself”.

## Session 6: Lending Hope for Your Own Wellness

**Purpose:** In this session, we will discuss how to believe in what we do. Maintaining hopefulness for ourselves, other helping professionals, and the people we serve is crucial to our collective success.



**Introspection (8 minutes):** Have participants reflect on the questions below:

- ▶ Do you see others working in the field as half-full or half-empty? Why?
- ▶ What makes it hard for you to hold hope?
- ▶ What else is challenging about your work?
- ▶ What about your work energizes you?

**Exercise instructions:** Imagine how hope feels to others. If you were to overhear a person you serve or a co-worker talking about how you helped them feel more hopeful, what would you want them to be saying? Write down your ideas and share them with the large group.

### Key Takeaways:

- ▶ Believe that what you're doing is helpful for people
- ▶ Believe that people can change
- ▶ Ask: How have you overcome difficult problems in the past?
- ▶ Recognize strengths: Show appreciation for past successes, future hopes, current efforts, struggles, resiliency, humanity, character, strengths, and personal values.

That took a lot of...	This shows...	You're really...
It must have taken a lot of work to...	What about you would make this possible?	You demonstrated [ x ] about yourself.

## Session 7: Coming up for Air

**Purpose:** In this session, we will discuss how to recognize signs of empathic distress.



**Introspection (5 minutes):** Take out a sheet of paper or notebook and respond to the following questions:

1. How full is my cup?
2. How connected do I feel to the things that are important to me?
3. Does my discomfort feel self-focused or other-focused?
4. Am I feeling the need to avoid parts of my life?

### Key Takeaways:

Read the article [Facing the Shadow Side of Empathy](#) by Elizabeth Scarlett.

When we feel overwhelmed, we may experience signs of empathic distress:

- ▶ Lack of energy to participate in what you usually enjoy
- ▶ Feeling fear, dread
- ▶ Feeling disconnected and numb
- ▶ Obsessive thoughts about the suffering of others
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, powerless
- ▶ Feeling unable to relate to others
- ▶ Inability to concentrate
- ▶ Feeling tired/exhausted, regardless of how much you sleep
- ▶ Frequent headaches or stomach aches
- ▶ Arguing with coworkers, friends, family
- ▶ Check in on your 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.

**Exercise 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 what you are hearing. You can ask open-ended questions and offer affirmations that remind the speaker of their strengths.

**Observer Role:** Listen to the conversation. Take note if the speaker is offering reflections and affirmations. Take note of the types of questions the speaker 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.

## 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.

## Key Takeaways:

Reflections do the following:

- ▶ Offer the other person's content back to them in a non-threatening way
- ▶ Invite the other person to continue speaking on a topic or delve deeper

<b>You're wondering if...</b>	<b>You want...</b>	<b>You're feeling...</b>
You're hoping...	It's almost as if...	You need...
For you, it's a matter of...	In other words, you're saying...	From your point of view...
You're finding...	It seems to you that...	You're wondering if...

Recognize strengths: Show appreciation for past successes, future hopes, current efforts, struggles, resiliency, humanity, character, strengths, and personal values.

That took a lot of...	This shows...	You're really...
It must have taken a lot of work to...	What about you would make this possible?	You demonstrated [ x ] about yourself.



## Session 9: Knowing Our Scope and Asking for Support

**Purpose:** Identify ways we know we are working outside the scope of our practice.

**Exercise instructions:** In your small groups, develop ways Helpers can respond to the “out-of-scope” situations. This could be a referral to another service and the steps the Helper should take, or it could be when and how to approach a supervisor for guidance and/or support.

## 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.

### Key Takeaways:

Listening for talk about change:

- ▶ I want to X.
- ▶ I can/could X.
- ▶ If I do this, X will happen.
- ▶ I need, ought, should X.
- ▶ I'm ready, willing, preparing to change.

Recognize strengths: Show appreciation for past successes, future hopes, current efforts, struggles, resiliency, humanity, character, strengths, and personal values.

That took a lot of...	This shows...	You're really...
It must have taken a lot of work to...	What about you would make this possible?	You demonstrated [ x ] about yourself.

Sharing information:

- ▶ Ask the person what they already know about the topic. "What do you already know about x?"
- ▶ Ask permission to share what you know and then share your part: "Would it be OK if I filled in a bit?"
- ▶ Ask the person what they think about what you shared. "What do you think about this? "What might you do next?"
- ▶ Mention choice: "You're the one who makes the decisions about how this ends up", "You know yourself best", "You're in charge of yourself".