

COSCA Certificate in Counselling Skills: Module 1 Unit 7

Sympathy and Empathy

There is a third aspect to listening, which Freud alluded to in the reference earlier: "While I am listening to the patient, I too, give myself over to the current of my unconscious thoughts." The counsellor thus listens to her – or himself, to what the counsellor is feeling about the client, and about aspects of the client's story. Indeed, the counsellor even listens to those apparently extraneous thoughts that come to mind, which sometimes prove to be more relevant than at first might seem possible.

Listening to oneself is also the first stage of empathising, or identifying with the client. Psychodynamic theory suggests that the ability to empathise, or to identify with how others might be feeling, is one which develops from the intimate relationship of mother and baby, each understanding intuitively how the other might be feeling. Empathy, or identification, means the ability to put oneself into someone's shoes, to get into their skin, to experience what they might be experiencing. There is, however, a difference between empathy and sympathy.

Empathy describes the ability to perceive what another person might be feeling, whether or not in those circumstance I would myself feel the same way. Sympathy means to experience in oneself the same feelings that the other person has. The ability to sympathise often forms a good starting point for empathy (as long as we do not confuse our own feelings with the other person's). Yet it is not necessary to be sympathetic to a person in order to be empathic. I had felt little sympathy in myself for Karl at the start of the interview – but this did not prevent me from trying to identify what he might be experiencing. On the other hand, despite her initial hostility, I felt more sympathetic towards Hannah, experiencing in myself some of the sadness which Hannah displayed at the point above at which we left her. It is important, however, to bear in mind that listening to oneself should not lead to the imposition of one's ideas and feelings on the client. The counsellor's feelings and associations always need checking out with the client's own material. "

From Psychodynamic Counselling in Action, by Michael Jacobs, published by Sage, London 1998, pages 29-30