

# Communication Skills II: Empathy and Probing

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As we have seen, attending and listening are not passive activities. But, since the fruit of attending and listening lies in the way the helper *responds* to the client, it is essential to move on to the responding skills of empathy and probing. Empathy as a form of human communication involves *both* listening and understanding *and* communicating understanding to the client. Empathy that remains locked up in the helper contributes little to the helping process.

Empathy continues to draw the attention of theoreticians and researchers (Bohart, 1988; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Emery, 1987; Marks & Tolsma, 1986; Miller, 1989; Patterson, 1984, 1985, 1988; Rogers, 1986a). However, there is still some confusion as to just what empathy is. Some of the confusion comes from the distinction between empathy as *a way of being* and empathy as *a communication process or skill* and the way this distinction is played out in the helping process.

### EMPATHY AS A WAY OF BEING

A helper cannot communicate an understanding of a client's world without getting in contact with that world. Therefore, a great deal of the discussion on empathy centers on the kind of attending, observing, and listening—the kind of “being with”—needed to develop an understanding of clients and their worlds. Empathy in this sense is primarily a mode of human contact.

Huxley (1963) noted the basic problem—the fact that it is metaphysically impossible to get inside another in such a way as actually to experience reality as the other does:

We live together, we act on, we react to, one another; but always in all circumstances we are alone. . . . Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies—all these are private and, except through symbols and second hand, incommunicable.

And yet he believes that empathy is both possible and necessary in human relationships:

Most island universes are sufficiently like one another to permit inferential understanding or even empathy or “feeling into.” . . . To see ourselves as others see us is a most salutary gift. Hardly less important is the capacity to see others as they are themselves. (pp. 12–13)

Huxley, then, describes empathy as an attempt to penetrate the metaphysical aloneness of the other.

Mayeroff (1971) sees empathy as an essential part of caring.

To care for another person, I must be able to understand him and his world as if I were inside it. I must be able to see, as it were, with his eyes

what his world is like to him and how he sees himself. Instead of merely looking at him in a detached way from outside, as if he were a specimen, I must be able to be with him in his world, "going" into his world in order to sense from the "inside" what life is like for him, what he is striving to be and what he requires to grow. (pp. 41-42)

Mayeroff goes on to describe caring as a tough and action-oriented, rather than a sentimental, value.

Rogers (1980) talks about basic empathic listening—being with and understanding—as "an unappreciated way of being" (p. 137) because, despite its usefulness in counseling and therapy, even so-called expert helpers either ignore it or are not skilled in its use. Rogers defines basic empathic listening, or being with, as follows:

It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other's life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments. (p. 142)

In Rogers's (1986b) view, this way of being with clients is so powerful that it is almost a sufficient condition for client progress.

To my mind, empathy is in itself a healing agent. It is one of the most potent aspects of therapy, because it releases, it confirms, it brings even the most frightened client into the human race. If a person is understood, he or she belongs. (p. 129)

Indeed, Rogers never ceased to maintain that empathy, respect, and genuineness constituted the "necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change" (Rogers, 1957).

This ability to enter another's world exacts a price of helpers. They must put themselves and their concerns aside as they listen to and are with their clients.

This negation of the self by the therapist involves a kind of self-aggression: to submerge oneself, to submit to not-knowing, and to put oneself aside. Perhaps it is one component of the sometimes exhausting nature of therapeutic work—the therapist not only bears intense affects but also denies the self in the pursuit of the other. (Margulies, 1984, p. 1030)

Margulies likens the helper to Keats's conception of the poet as a person without identity since he or she is so open and filled with the realities of the world and others. Indeed, authors who feel strongly about empathy as a way of being become almost lyrical in its praises. Kohut (1978) writes: "Empathy, the accepting, confirming, and understanding human echo evoked by the self, is a psychological nutrient without which human

life, as we know and cherish it, could not be sustained" (p. 705). Empathy, then, becomes a value, a philosophy, a cause with almost religious overtones.

This exalted conception of empathy poses a number of problems. It can put an essential process—listening and responding to clients with understanding—beyond the capability of many helpers. It can so focus on one aspect of the helping process, however important it might be, as to distort the rest. Prospective helpers can be trained mainly in attending, listening, and empathy and not in the other skills needed to deliver a problem-management and opportunity-development model of helping. I have no problem with empathy as a way of being, and I acknowledge that too few helpers are capable of it. I do have problems with empathy as a cult and with exalting it so as to make everything else subservient to it.

### Empathic Relationships

However deep one person's empathic understanding of another, it needs to be communicated to the other. This does not necessarily mean that understanding must always be put into words. Given enough time, people can establish what I call empathic relationships with one another in which understanding is communicated in a variety of rich and subtle ways without being put into words. A simple glance across a room as one spouse sees the other trapped in a conversation with a person he or she does not want to be with can communicate worlds of understanding. The glance says: "I know you feel caught. I know you don't want to hurt the other person's feelings. I can feel the struggle going on inside. I know you'd like me to rescue you, if I can do so tactfully." People with empathic relationships often express empathy in actions. An arm around the shoulders of someone who has just suffered a defeat can be filled with both support and empathy. I was in the home of a poverty-stricken family when the father came bursting through the front door shouting, "I got the job!" His wife, without saying a word, went to the refrigerator, got a bottle of beer with a makeshift label on which "CHAMPAGNE" had been written and offered it to her husband. Beer never tasted so good.

Empathic participation in the world of another person obviously admits of degrees. As a helper, you must be able to enter clients' worlds deeply enough to understand their struggles with problem situations or their search for opportunities with enough depth to make your participation in problem management and opportunity development valid and substantial. If your help is based on an incorrect or invalid understanding of the client, then your helping may lead him or her astray. If your understanding is valid but superficial, then you might miss the central issues of the client's life.

Some people do enter caringly into the world of another and are "with" him or her but are unable to communicate understanding, especially through words. Others develop the skill or technology of communicating empathic understanding but have little to communicate because their experiencing of or being with the other person is superficial. Helpers need both the depth of human contact and understanding and the ability to communicate this understanding in verbal and nonverbal ways. The following discussion of the microskills involved in the communication of empathy is based on the assumption that the helper enters the world of the client through attending, observing, listening, and "being with" deeply enough to make a difference.

### Labels as a Perversion of Understanding

As suggested in Chapter 5, the very labels we learn in our training can militate against empathic understanding. Kleinman (1988) makes a useful distinction between illness and disease. Illness, he says, consists of patients' subjective experience of their distress and concerns and the ways they talk about them, express them, and try to cope with them. Disease, on the other hand, is a category more removed from the patient's immediate experience. It is the product of the minds of theorists and practitioners, a reworking and translation of the patient's experience into the language and terms of the profession. There is a tendency to strip away the "illness" in order to find the real "disease" underneath. The disease is understood, the patient is not. While helping is not a medical specialty (although medical personnel often engage in it), helpers, too, get caught in a similar bind, forgetting that their labels are *interpretations* rather than understandings of the client's experience. It is not that certain interpretations of the client's experiences are not helpful, as we shall see in a later chapter. Rather, problems arise when pre-cast interpretations drawn from our theories about people and their problems preempt our understanding of clients from *their* points of view.

## EMPATHY AS A COMMUNICATION SKILL

If attending and listening are the skills that enable helpers to get in touch with the world of the client, then empathy is the skill that enables them to communicate their understanding of this world. A secure starting point in helping others is listening to them, struggling to understand their concerns, and sharing this understanding with them. Indeed, when clients are asked what they find helpful in counseling interviews, understanding gets top ratings (Elliott, 1985). Since empathy in this sense is a skill, it is something that can be learned.

As I have noted, you cannot respond empathically to clients unless you *are* empathic. Now, on the assumption that you are empathic, we turn to what needs to be done to *express* empathy to your clients.

### The Three Dimensions of Communication Skills in the Helping Process

The communication skills involved in responding to and engaging in dialogue with clients have three components or dimensions: perceptiveness, know-how, and assertiveness.

#### Perceptiveness

Your communication skills are only as good as the accuracy of the perceptions in which they are based. If your perceptions are inaccurate, then your communication skills are flawed at the root.

Jenny is counseling Frank in a community mental health center. Frank is scared about what is going to happen to him in the counseling process, but he does not talk about it. Jenny senses his discomfort but thinks that he is angry rather than scared. She says: "Frank, I'm wondering what's making you so angry right now." Since Frank does not feel angry, he says nothing. He's startled by what she says and feels even more insecure. Jenny takes his silence as a confirmation of his "anger." She tries to get him to talk about it.

Jenny's perception is wrong and disrupts the helping process. The kind of perceptiveness needed to be a good helper is based on the quality of one's "being with" clients and on practical intelligence. It can be developed through experience.

#### Know-How

Once you are aware of what kind of response is called for in the helping process, you need to be able to deliver it. For instance, if you are aware that a client is anxious and confused because this is his first visit to a helper, it does little good if your understanding remains locked up inside you.

Frank and Jenny end up arguing about his "anger." Frank finally gets up and leaves. Jenny, of course, takes this as a sign that she was right in the first place. Frank goes to see his minister. The minister sees quite clearly that Frank is scared and confused. But he lacks the know-how to translate his perceptions into meaningful interactions with him. As Frank talks, the minister nods and says "uh-huh" quite a bit. He is fully present to Frank and listens intently, but he does not know how to respond.

Understandings are lost without the skill of delivering them to the client.

### Assertiveness

Accurate perceptions and excellent know-how are meaningless unless they are actually used when called for. If you see that a client needs to be challenged and know how to do it but still fail to do so, you do not pass the assertiveness test. Your goodness remains locked up inside you.

Edna, a young helper in the Center for Student Development, is in the middle of her second session with Aurelio, a graduate student. It soon becomes clear to her that he is making sexual overtures. In her training she did quite well in challenging her fellow trainees. The feedback she got from them and the trainer was that she challenged others directly and caringly. But now she feels immobilized. She does not want to hurt Aurelio or embarrass herself. She tries to ignore his seductive behavior, but Aurelio takes silence to mean consent.

In this case awareness and know-how are both lost because of a lack of assertiveness. The helper does not act when action is called for. This is not to say that assertiveness is an overriding value in itself. Certainly, to be assertive without perceptiveness and know-how is to court disaster. The counseling profession can do without bulls in the china shop.

### The Know-How of Empathy

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the second aspect of empathy as a communication skill—know-how. Let's start with a few examples. A single middle-aged man who has been unable to keep a job shares his frustration with a counselor.

**Client:** I've been to other counselors, and nothing has ever really worked. I don't even know why I'm trying again. But things are so bad. . . . I just have to get a job. I guess something has to be done, so I'm trying it all over again.

**Helper:** You're here with mixed feelings. You're not sure that our sessions will help you get a job and keep it, but you feel you have to try something.

**Client:** Yes, "something," but I don't know what the something is. What can I get here that will help me get a job? Or keep a job?

The helper's nondefensive response helps diffuse the client's anger and refocus his energies.

In the next example, a woman who is going to have a hysterectomy is talking with a hospital counselor the night before surgery.

**Patient:** I'm just so afraid. God knows what they'll find when they go in tomorrow. You know, they don't tell you much. And that usually spells trouble.

**Counselor:** The uncertainty of the whole thing really gets to you.

**Client:** Yes, that's it—not knowing what's going to happen. I think I can take the pain. But the uncertainty drives me up the wall. . . . Well, I guess it's that way with everyone.

The accuracy of the helper's response does not solve all problems, but the patient does move a bit, recognizing her solidarity with others going through the same thing.

In the next example, a young woman visits the student services center at her college.

**Client:** And so here I am, two months pregnant. I don't want to be pregnant. I'm not married, and I don't even love the father. To tell the truth, I don't even think I like him. Oh, Lord, this is something that happens to other people, not me! I wake up thinking this whole thing is unreal.

**Helper:** You're still so amazed that it's almost impossible to accept that it's true.

**Client:** Amazed? I'm stupefied! At my own stupidity for getting myself into this. Maybe that's it. And I feel so alone.

After the helper's empathy, self-recrimination and the feeling of being alone emerge as perhaps deeper concerns for the client.

The skill of communicating understanding, then, is critical in moving clients forward. Let's now examine in greater detail what the helpers are doing in these examples.

## ELEMENTS OF EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING

### Experiences, Behaviors, Feelings

To begin with, the technology of empathy involves translating your understanding of the client's *experiences*, *behaviors*, and *feelings* into a response through which you share that understanding with the client. If a student comes to you, sits down, looks at the floor, hunches over, and haltingly tells you that he has just failed a test, that his girlfriend has told him she doesn't want to see him anymore, and that he might lose his part-time job because he has been "goofing off," you might respond to him by saying something like this:

**Helper:** That's a lot of misery all at once.

**Client:** I'm not even sure who I'm mad at the most. Damn!

You see that he is both agitated and depressed (affect), and you understand in some initial way what has happened to him (experiences) and what he has done (behaviors) to contribute to the problem situation, and then you communicate to him your understanding of his world. This communication is *basic empathy*. If your perceptions are correct, then it is *accurate empathy*. In this example, the helper might notice that the client talks about getting angry with the people involved, but does not take much

responsibility himself. But at this point she “files” this observation because this is not the time to offer it. For the moment, basic empathy is what is called for.

Another client, after a few sessions with you spread out over six months, says something like this:

**Client** (talking in an animated way): I really think that things couldn't be going better. I'm doing very well at my new job, and my husband isn't just putting up with it. He thinks it's great. He and I are getting along better than ever, even sexually, and I never expected that. We're both working at our marriage. I guess I'm just waiting for the bubble to burst.

**Helper:** You feel great because things have been going better than you ever expected—it's almost too good to be true.

**Client:** What I'm finding out is that I can make things come true instead of sitting around waiting for them to happen as I usually do. I've got to keep making my own luck.

**Helper:** You've discovered the secret!

This client, too, talks about her experiences and behaviors and expresses feelings, the flavor of which you capture in your empathic response. The response seems to be a useful one, because the client moves on.

### Core Messages

In order to respond empathically, you can ask yourself, as you listen to the client: “What *core message* or messages are being expressed in terms of feelings and the experiences and behaviors that underlie these feelings? What is most important in what the client is saying to me?” Once you feel you have identified the core messages, then you check out your understanding with the client. The formula “*You feel . . . because . . .*” (used in the preceding example) provides the essentials for an empathic response.

### Feelings

“*You feel . . .*” is to be followed by the correct family of emotions and the correct intensity. For instance, the statements “You feel hurt,” “You feel relieved,” and “You feel great” specify different *families* of emotion. The statements “You feel annoyed,” “You feel angry,” and “You feel furious” specify different *degrees of intensity* in the same family.

The emotions clients express in the interview may or may not be the ones associated with the problem situation. For instance, a client may express anger over the fact that he gives in to fear when talking with his father. If your empathic response picks up the fear the client is describing but not the anger he is expressing now, the client may feel misunderstood. “You feel angry because you let fear get the best of you in your interactions with your father” is an accurate response. Notice that there is a difference between clients' talking about feelings and emotions experienced in the past and their expressing feelings and emotions in the interview.

### Experiences and Behaviors

The “*because . . .*” in our formula is to be followed by an indication of the experiences and behaviors that underlie the client's feelings. “You feel angry because he stole your course notes and you let him get away with it” specifies both the experience and the behavior (in this case, a failure to act) that give rise to the feeling. Some additional examples:

- “You feel sad because moving means leaving all your friends.”
- “You feel anxious because the results of the biopsy aren't in yet.”
- “You feel frustrated because the social-service bureau keeps making you do things you don't want to do.”
- “You feel annoyed with yourself because you didn't even reach the simple goals you set for yourself.”
- “You feel hopeless because even your best efforts don't seem to help you lose weight.”
- “You feel relieved because sticking to the regime of diet and exercise means that you probably won't need to go on the medicine.”
- “You feel angry with me because you see me pushing all the responsibility on you.”

Of course, the formula itself is not important; it merely provides a framework for communicating understanding to the client. Though many people in training use the formula to help themselves communicate understanding of core messages, experienced helpers tend to avoid formulas and use whatever wording best communicates their understanding.

### Listening to the Context, Not Just the Words

As Berger (1984) noted, empathy is contextual and integrating. A good empathic response is not based just on the client's immediate words and nonverbal behavior. It takes into account the context of what is said, everything that “surrounds” and permeates a client's statement. You are listening to clients in the context of their lives.

Recall the people-in-systems framework mentioned in Chapter 1. For example, Jeff, a white teenager, is accused of beating a black youth whose car stalled in a white neighborhood. The beaten youth is still in a coma. When Jeff talks to a court-appointed counselor, the counselor listens to what Jeff says in terms of Jeff's upbringing and environment. The context includes the racist attitudes of many people in his blue-collar neighborhood, the sporadic violence there, the fact that his father died when Jeff was in primary school, a somewhat indulgent mother with a history of alcoholism, and easy access to soft drugs. The following interchange takes place.

**Jeff:** I don't know why I did it. I just did it, me and these other guys. We'd been drinking a bit and smoking up a bit—but not too much. It was just the whole thing.

**Counselor:** It's almost like it's something that happened rather than something you did, and yet you know, somewhat bitterly, that you actually did it.

**Jeff:** Bitter's the word! I can be screwed for the rest of my life. It's not like I got up that morning saying "I'm going to bash me a black today."

The counselor's response is in no way an attempt to excuse Jeff's behavior, but it does factor in some of the environment in which Jeff lives. Later on he will challenge Jeff to decide whether the environment is to own him or whether, to the degree that this is possible, he is to own the environment.

### Selective Responding

In most of the examples given so far the helper has responded to both affect and content, that is, to both feelings and the experiences and behaviors underlying the feelings. While this might ordinarily be the best kind of response, helpers can respond selectively so as to emphasize feelings, experiences, or behaviors. Consider the following example of a client who is experiencing stress because of his wife's health and because of concerns at work.

**Client:** This week I tried to get my wife to see the doctor, but she refused, even though she fainted a couple of times. The kids had no school, so they were underfoot almost constantly. I haven't been able to finish a report my boss expects from me next Monday.

**Counselor:** It's been a lousy week all the way around.

**Client:** As bad as they come. When things are lousy both at home and at work, there's no place for me to relax. I just want to get the hell out of the house and find some place to forget it all.

Here the counselor chooses to emphasize the feelings of the client, because she believes that his feelings of frustration and irritation are what is uppermost in his consciousness right now. At another time or with another client, the emphasis might be quite different. In the next example, a young woman is talking about her problems with her father.

**Client:** My dad yelled at me all the time last year about how I dress. But just last week I heard him telling someone how nice I looked. He yells at my sister about the same things he ignores when my younger brother does them. Sometimes he's really nice with my mother and other times—too much of the time—he's just awful: demanding, grouchy, sarcastic.

**Counselor:** The *inconsistency* gets to you.

**Client:** Right; it's hard for all of us to know where we stand. I hate coming home when I'm not sure which "dad" will be there.

In this response the counselor emphasizes the client's experience of her father, for he feels that this is the core of the client's message. The point is that effective helpers do not stick to rigid formulas in using empathy.

For some clients, fear of intimacy makes the helping sessions difficult. Since empathy is a kind of intimacy, too much empathy too soon can inhibit rather than facilitate helping. Warmth, closeness, and intimacy are not goals in themselves. As we will see, the goal of Stage I is to help clients clarify their problems. If empathy, or too much empathy too soon, stands in the way of this goal, then it should be avoided.

Other clients are threatened by a discussion of their feelings. In this case it might be better to focus on experiences and behaviors and proceed only gradually to a discussion of feelings. The following client, an unmarried man in his mid-thirties who has come to talk about "certain dissatisfactions" in his life, has shown some reluctance to express or even to talk about feelings.

**Client** (in a pleasant, relaxed voice): My mother is always trying to make a little kid out of me. And I'm in my mid-thirties! Last week, in front of a group of my friends, she brought out my rubber boots and an umbrella and gave me a little talk on how to dress for bad weather (laughs).

**Counselor A:** It might be hard to admit it, but I get that down deep you were furious.

**Client:** Well, I don't know about that.

**Counselor B:** So she keeps playing the mother role to the hilt.

**Client:** And the "hilt" includes not wanting me to grow up. But I am grown up . . . well, pretty grown up.

Counselor A pushes the emotion issue and is met with mild resistance. Counselor B, choosing to respond to the "strong-mother" issue rather than the more sensitive "being-kept-a-kid" issue, gives the client more room to move. This works, for the client himself moves toward the more sensitive issue.

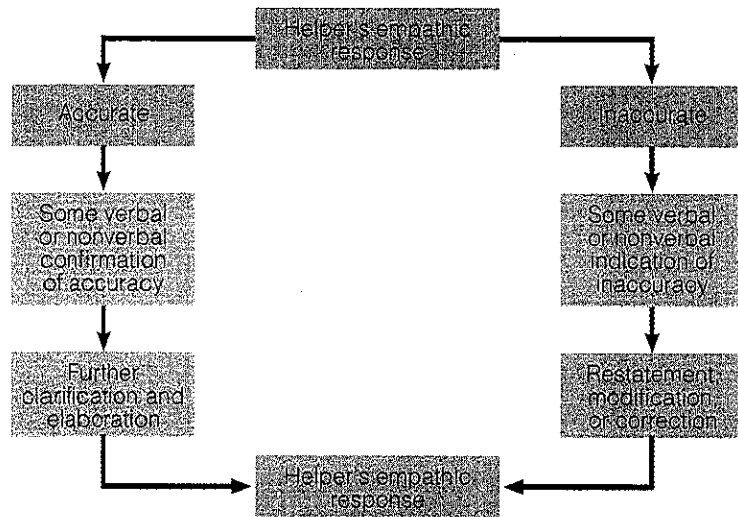
### Accurate Empathy: Staying on Track

Although helpers should strive to be accurate in the understanding they communicate, all helpers can be somewhat inaccurate at times. But they can learn from their mistakes. If the helper's response is accurate, the client often tends to confirm its accuracy by a nod or some other nonverbal cue, or by a phrase such as "that's right" or "exactly." Then the client goes on to give more specific details about the problem situation.

**Helper:** So the neighborhood in which you live pushes you toward a whole variety of behaviors that can get you in trouble.

**Client:** You bet it does! For instance, everyone's selling drugs. You not only end up using them, but you begin to think about pushing them. It's just too easy.

When the helper again responds with empathy, this leads to the next cycle. The problem situation becomes increasingly clear in terms of specific experiences, behaviors, and feelings.



**FIGURE 6-1** The Movement Caused by Accurate and Inaccurate Empathy

When a response is inaccurate, the client often lets the counselor know in any one of a variety of ways: he or she may stop dead, fumble around, go off on a new tangent, tell the counselor "That's not exactly what I meant," or even try to provide empathy for the counselor and get him or her back on track. But all is not lost. A helper who is alert to these cues can get back on track. Recall the case of Ben, the man who lost his wife and daughter; Liz is his helper. Ben has been talking about the changes that have taken place since the accident.

**Liz:** So you don't want to do a lot of the things you used to do before the accident. For instance, you don't want to socialize much any more.

**Ben** (pausing a long time): Well, I'm not sure that it's a question of wanting to or not. I mean that it takes much more energy to do a lot of things. It takes so much energy to phone others to get together. It takes so much energy sometimes being with others that I just don't try. It's as if there's a weight on my soul a lot of the time.

**Liz:** It's like the movie of a man in slow motion—it's so hard to do almost anything.

**Ben:** Right. I've been in slow motion, low gear in lots of things.

Ben says that it is not a question of motivation but of energy. The difference is important. By picking up on it, Liz gets the interview back on track.

Figure 6-1 indicates the movement both when helpers are on the mark and when they fail to grasp what the client has expressed. If you are empathic in your relationship with your clients, they will not be put off by occasional inaccuracies on your part.

## THE USES OF EMPATHY

Empathy is not a miracle pill, but it can contribute to the overall helping process in a variety of ways. Other things being equal (such as the skill of the helper and the state of the client), empathy can help to do the following:

- *Build the relationship.* In interpersonal communication, empathy is a tool of civility. Making an effort to get in touch with another's frame of reference sends a message of respect. Therefore, empathy plays an important part in establishing rapport with clients.

- *Stimulate self-exploration.* Empathy is an unobtrusive tool for helping clients explore themselves and their problem situations. The understood client is influenced to move on, to explore more widely or more deeply. As Havens (1978) put it, the client's "narrative flow" is stimulated and deepened. Or in Driscoll's (1984) commonsense terms, "Empathic statements are those recurring nicker-and-dime interventions which each contribute only a smidgen of therapeutic movement, but without which the course of therapeutic progress would be markedly slower" (p. 90).

- *Check understandings.* In describing empathy as a response, Rogers (1986a) used the terms "testing understandings" and "checking perceptions." You may think you understand the client and what he or she has said only to find out, when you share your understanding, that you were off the mark. This gives you an opportunity to get back on track.

- *Provide support.* Since empathy is a way of staying in touch with clients and their experiences, behaviors, and feelings, it is a way of providing support throughout the helping process. It is never wrong to make sure that you are in touch with the client's frame of reference.

- *Lubricate communication.* Empathy acts as a kind of communications lubricant; it encourages and facilitates dialogue. It thus encourages collaboration in the helping process.

- *Focus attention.* Empathy helps client and helper alike understand the client's experiences, behaviors, and emotions. Core issues are held up to the light. As Driscoll (1984, pp. 88–90) noted, empathy has a way of focusing attention on an issue that encourages clients to understand and review important messages embedded in their experiences, behaviors, and feelings.

- *Restrain the helper.* Empathy keeps helpers from doing useless things such as asking too many questions and giving premature and inept advice. Empathy puts the ball back into the client's court and thus in its own way encourages the client to act.

- *Pave the way.* Empathy paves the way for the stronger interventions suggested by the helping model, including challenging a client's point of view, setting goals, formulating strategies, and moving to action.

Consider the following interchange between a trainee and her trainer.

**Trainee:** I don't think I'm going to make a good counselor. The other people in the program seem brighter than I am. Others seem to be picking up the knack of empathy faster than I am. I'm still afraid of responding directly to others, even with empathy. I have to reevaluate my participation in the program.

**Trainer:** You're feeling pretty inadequate and it's getting you down, perhaps even enough to make you think of quitting.

**Trainee:** And yet I know that giving up is part of the problem, part of my style. I'm not the brightest, but I'm certainly not dumb either. The way I compare myself to others is not very useful. I know that I've been picking up some of these skills. I do attend and listen well. I'm perceptive even though at times I have a hard time sharing these perceptions with others.

When the trainer "hits the mark," the trainee moves forward and explores her problem more fully.

Empathy as a way of "being with" others is a human value and needs no justification. Empathy as a communication skill, however, is instrumental; that is, it is good to the degree that it helps a client persist in the helping process and move on toward problem management. Asbury (1984) demonstrated that teachers can help students decrease disruptive classroom behaviors through empathy. The teachers involved in the study talked to the offenders for a couple of minutes each day, listening to each of them and responding with empathy. This should not be taken as proof that "empathy cures." Indeed, it might well have been the attention the offenders received that helped them change their behavior. Even so, empathy was part of whatever package did the trick.

## DO'S AND DON'TS IN EXPRESSING EMPATHY

Here are a few hints to help you improve the quality of your empathic responses.

### Some Things to Do

**Give yourself time to think.** Beginners sometimes jump in too quickly with an empathic response when the client pauses. "Too quickly" means that they do not give themselves enough time to reflect on what the client has just said in order to identify the core message being communicated. Even the experts pause and allow themselves to assimilate what the client is saying.

**Use short responses.** I find that the helping process goes best when I engage the client in a dialogue rather than give speeches or allow the client to ramble. In a dialogue the helper's responses are relatively frequent, but they should also be lean and trim. In trying to be accurate, the beginner may become long-winded, sometimes speaking longer than the client in

trying to elaborate an adequate response. This often happens when the helper tries to respond too quickly. Again, the question "What is the core of what this person is saying to me?" can help you make your responses short, concrete, and accurate.

**Gear your response to the client, but remain yourself.** If a client speaks animatedly, telling the helper of his elation over various successes in his life, and she replies accurately, but in a flat, dull voice, her response is not fully empathic. This does not mean that helpers should mimic their clients. It means that part of being with the client is sharing in a reasonable way in his or her emotional tone.

**Ten-Year-Old Client:** My teacher started picking on me from the first day of class. I don't fool around more than anyone else in class, but she gets me anytime I do. I think she's picking on me because she doesn't like me. She doesn't yell at Bill Smith, and he acts funnier than I do.

**Counselor A:** You're perplexed. You wonder why she singles you out for so much discipline.

**Counselor B:** You're mad because she seems unfair in the way she picks on you.

It is evident which of these two helpers will probably get through. Counselor A's language is stilted, not in tune with the way a 10-year-old speaks. On the other hand, helpers should not adopt a language that is not their own just to be on the client's wavelength. For instance, in the next example a middle-class probation officer is responding to a client who is tempted to steal in order to pay off a debt to someone he fears:

**Probation Officer:** Unless you find some bread, man, that cat's going to get you wasted.

The probation officer is using the client's jargon. Helpers can use informal language without using adaptations that are simply not their own.

### Some Things to Avoid Doing

There are a number of poor substitutes for empathy that are best avoided. Peter, the client in the next example, is a college freshman. This is his second visit to a counselor in the student-services center. After talking about a number of concerns, Peter speaks in a halting voice, looking at the floor and clasping his hands tightly between his knees.

**Peter:** What seems to be really bothering me is a problem with sex. I don't even know whether I'm a man or not, and I'm in college. I don't go out with women. I don't even think I want to. I may . . . well, I may even be gay. . . . Uh, I don't know.



The following are some examples of poor responses.

**No response.** First of all, the counselor might say nothing. Generally, if the client says something significant, respond to it, however briefly. Otherwise the client might think that what he or she has just said doesn't merit a response.

**A question.** The counselor might ask something like: "How long has this been bothering you, Peter?" This response ignores the emotion Peter is experiencing. Since a question elicits further information, it implies that Peter has not said anything worth responding to.

**A cliché.** The counselor might say: "Many people struggle with sexual identity throughout their lives." This is a cliché. It completely misses the feelings of the client and deals only with the content of his statement, and even then only in the vaguest way. The impact of such a response is "You don't really have a problem at all, at least not a serious one."

**An interpretation.** A counselor might say something like "This sexual thing is probably really just a symptom, John. I've got a hunch that you're not really accepting yourself." The counselor fails to respond to the client's feelings and also distorts the content of the client's communication. The response implies that what is really important is hidden from the client.

**Advice.** Another counselor might say: "There are a few videotapes on sexuality in the college years I'd like you to take a look at." This counselor also ignores Peter's feelings and jumps to an action program in sex education. It well may be that Peter could use some good input on sexual development, but this is neither the time nor the way to accomplish that.

**Pretending to understand.** Clients are sometimes confused, distracted, and in a highly emotional state; all these conditions affect the clarity of what they are saying about themselves. On the other hand, counselors themselves might become distracted and fail to follow the client. In either case, it's a mistake to feign understanding. Genuineness demands that counselors admit that they are lost and then work to get back on track again. A statement like "I think I've lost you. Could we go over that once more?" indicates that you think it important to stay with the client. It is a sign of respect. Admitting that you're lost is infinitely preferable to such clichés as "uh-huh," "ummmm," and "I understand." Peter is saying that he is having a problem with his sexual identity and finds it very difficult to talk about it. The mature counselor can take this in stride, even though it's an entirely new part of Peter's story.

**Parroting.** Empathy is not mere parroting. The mechanical helper corrupts basic empathy by simply restating what the client has said.

**Counselor:** So it's really a problem with sex that's bothering you. You're not sure of your manhood even though you're in college. You not only don't go out with women, but you're not even sure you want to. All this makes you think that you might be gay, but you're not sure.

Sounds awful, doesn't it? Here repetition is substituting for empathy. A tape recorder could do that perfectly.

Some people use the terms "empathy" interchangeably with "reflection" or "rephrasing." While rephrasing is not the same as parroting, I see a distinction between rephrasing and empathy. When I listen to clients and keep asking myself such questions as "What is this person's point of view?" and "What are the core messages in what this person is saying?" I am engaged in a process that is more than mere reflection. When I am empathic, I am sharing a part of myself, that is, my understanding of the other person.

**Sympathy and agreement.** Being empathic is not the same as being sympathetic. Sympathy, as Gill (1982) noted, has much more in common with pity, compassion, commiseration, and condolence than with empathy. While these are fully human traits, they are not particularly useful in counseling. Book (1988) spells out the reasons for this:

Empathy is often confused with sympathy, kindness, and approval. Thus, it may come to mean behaving compliantly in response to the patient's behavior and [responding] sympathetically to his or her problems. It may evoke a stance of unquestioning acceptance of the patient's experiences by the therapist. . . . It leaves the therapist stuck in the participant (as opposed to observer) stance only. Boggled down in this stance, the therapist runs the risk of only identifying with and colluding with the patient's experience. (p. 422)

Sympathy, as the following example indicates, denotes agreement, whereas empathy denotes understanding and acceptance of the *person* of the client.

A Holocaust survivor raged against the rudeness to which he felt subjected at work. His Jewish therapist responded, "It really makes me angry when I hear that. What the hell's the matter with them?" The patient responded, "That's what I'm telling you. They're all a bunch of butchers!" (Book, 1988, p. 422)

Here the counselor's collusion obscured the real issue: this client's aggressive and suspicious stance invited the very rudeness he complained about. Some clients fail to manage their lives better because they take an "Isn't it awful!" attitude toward their problems. Sympathy makes this worse. In our example of Peter, sympathy would not be of help ("Yes, isn't it awful, Peter!"). The objectivity of empathy rather than the collusion of sympathy will prove more useful:

**BOX 6-1 Suggestions for the Use of Empathy**

1. Remember that empathy is, ideally, a way of being and not just a professional role or communication skill.
2. Attend carefully, both physically and psychologically, and listen to the client's point of view.
3. Try to set your judgments and biases aside for the moment and walk in the shoes of the client.
4. As the client speaks, listen especially for core messages.
5. Listen to both verbal and nonverbal messages and their context.
6. Respond fairly frequently, but briefly, to the client's core messages.
7. Be flexible and tentative enough that the client does not feel pinned down.
8. Use empathy to keep the client focused on important issues.
9. Move gradually toward the exploration of sensitive topics and feelings.
10. After responding with empathy, attend carefully to cues that either confirm or deny the accuracy of your response.
11. Determine whether your empathic responses are helping the client remain focused while developing and clarifying important issues.
12. Note signs of client stress or resistance; try to judge whether these arise because you are inaccurate or because you are too accurate.
13. Keep in mind that the communication skill of empathy, however important, is a tool to help clients see themselves and their problem situations more clearly with a view to managing them more effectively.

**Counselor:** You've got a number of misgivings about just where you stand with yourself sexually, and it's certainly not easy talking about it.

**Peter:** I'm having a terrible time talking about it. I'm even shaking right now.

The counselor's empathy gives Peter the opportunity to deal with his immediate anxiety and then to explore his major concern.

Box 6-1 summarizes some of the main points about the use of empathy as a communication skill.

**A Caution on Empathy**

While some may expect too much of empathy in and of itself, others do not understand and respect its power. I personally prefer to see it integrated into a realistic helping model that provides both challenge and support at the service of both the client-helper relationship and problem-managing behavior change. Driscoll (1984), with his usual common sense, puts empathy in perspective.

Showing that we understand should not be seen as incompatible in any way with any of the range of further interventions. The sequencing of therapeutic interventions is important. One who acknowledges another's position is more easily seen as an ally, and is in a better position from

there to challenge and restructure. Expressing an understanding is thus an initial intervention which prepares the groundwork for later, more forceful strategies for change. In general, as each issue is introduced, we should convey that we understand the client's position on that issue, and then continue from there to interpretation and redirection.

The empathic response is given an exalted position in classical client-centered counseling; it is the answer to everything, and anything else a counselor might do is just plain wrong. Most eclectics use empathic responses but reject the restrictive ideology. We see the empathic response as but one of a range of available therapeutic responses. (p. 90)

A further caution about the place of communication skills in the helping process is found at the end of this chapter.

**THE ART OF PROBING**

In most of the examples used in the discussion of empathy, clients have demonstrated a willingness to explore themselves and their behavior rather freely. Obviously, this is not always the case. While it is essential that helpers respond empathically to their clients when they do reveal themselves, it is also necessary at times to encourage, prompt, and help clients to explore problem situations when they fail to do so spontaneously. Therefore, the ability to use prompts and probes well is another important skill.

Prompts and probes are verbal tactics for helping clients talk about themselves and define their problems more concretely in terms of *specific* experiences, behaviors, and feelings. As such, they can be used in all the stages of the helping process.

Prompts and probes, therefore, are at the service of information generation. I don't mean mindless information gathering based on the unvoiced assumption that there is some kind of magic relationship between the amount of information gathered and the client's progress—that there is some magic *bit* of information that, once unearthed, will do the trick. This is the stuff of movies. Information gathering needs to serve the problem-management process, not lead it. In this sense, quality of information is much more important than quantity. Probing is the search for quality information, information on which the client can act.

Prompts and probes can take the form of questions, statements, or interjections. Let's look at examples of each.

**Questions That Help Clients Talk More Freely and Concretely**

I start with the premise that helpers often ask too many questions. If in doubt, they ask a question. For them, the question is the helping equivalent of talking about the weather. Questions can indeed be useful, but guidelines are called for.

**1. Do not assault clients with volleys of questions.** When clients are asked too many questions, they feel grilled, and this does little for the helping relationship.

I feel certain that we ask too many questions, often meaningless ones. We ask questions that confuse the interviewee, that interrupt him. We ask questions the interviewee cannot possibly answer. We even ask questions we don't want the answers to, and, consequently, we do not hear the answers when [they are] forthcoming. (Benjamin, 1981, p. 71; the author devotes an entire chapter to the question, its uses, and his misgivings about it)

Let's assume, in the example of Peter, that the helper asks Peter a whole series of questions:

- "When did you first feel like this?"
- "With whom do you discuss sex?"
- "What kinds of sexual experience have you had?"
- "What makes you think you are gay?"

And so on and so forth. Peter might well say, "Goodbye, no thanks" in response to these intrusions. Heavy reliance on questions is a sign of ineptness, and it can turn helping interviews into boring question-and-answer sessions that go nowhere.

**2. Ask questions that serve a purpose.** Don't ask random, aimless questions. Ask questions that have teeth (but not barbs) in them, questions that help clients get somewhere. If the question is information-oriented, it should be information that is useful to the client. Some helpers mindlessly use questions to amass information, much of which proves to be irrelevant. Ask questions that challenge the client to think. Consider the following exchange between Peter and his counselor.

**Peter:** I've got moral principles. I can't be gay. . . . I might as well shut down my sex life. You know, forget about it.

**Counselor:** Is that what you want?

**Peter** (pausing): Well, no, of course not. Who would?

Here the counselor uses a question, not to gather information, but to challenge Peter to consider what he's saying. The question has a purpose.

Later, Peter is talking about his relationship with one of his best friends.

**Peter:** He has no idea that I'm attracted to him.

**Counselor:** What's the worst thing that could happen if he knew?

Peter is making all sorts of assumptions about how people would react to him if they knew he was ambivalent about his sexual identity. The helper uses the question to open up Peter's "assumptive world" for discussion.

Ask questions that help clients get into the stages and steps of the helping model. In the following example, the client has been talking about his dissatisfaction with his present job.

**Counselor:** If you had just the kind of job you wanted, what would it look like?

**Client:** Well, let me think. . . . It certainly would not be just the money. It would be something that interested me.

Note that the question puts the ball once more in the client's court and that it centers the discussion on Stage II, the preferred scenario.

**3. Ask open-ended questions that get clients to talk about specific experiences, behaviors, and feelings.** As a general rule, ask open-ended questions, that is, questions that require more than a simple yes or no or similar one-word answer. Not "Now that you've decided to take early retirement, do you have any plans?" but "Now that you've decided to take early retirement, what are your plans?" Counselors who ask closed questions—questions that invite one-word answers—find themselves asking more and more questions. This is often a problem for beginners. Of course, if a specific piece of information is needed, then a closed question may be used: "How many jobs have you had in the past two years?" Such a question could provide essential background information in a career-counseling session.

Ordinarily, however, prefer open-ended questions that help clients fill in things that are being left out of their story, whether experiences, behaviors, or feelings. Probes can keep clients from rambling and talking in generalities.

**Client:** I don't like doing those kinds of things.

**Helper:** What kinds of things?

**Client:** I don't enjoy cleaning the house, doing the laundry, picking up after the kids. . . . Cooking is about the only household task I enjoy.

**Client:** He treats me badly, and I don't like it!

**Helper:** What does he do?

**Client:** He laughs at me behind my back—I know he does.

**Client:** Coming home at night is a real downer for me.

**Helper:** What's a "downer" like for you?

**Client:** I see him sitting in that chair, helpless, and my heart goes out to him so much. Or I see him there and I get so angry because I'm trapped here with him.

In each case, the client's story gets more specific.

**4. Keep the focus on the client.** Questions should keep the focus on clients and their interests, not on the theories of helpers. One possibility

is to have clients ask relevant questions of themselves. In the following example, Jill, the helper, and Justin, the client, have been discussing how Justin's disability—he has lost a leg to cancer—is standing in the way of his picking up his life again:

**Jill:** If you had to ask yourself one question right now, what would it be?

**Justin** (pausing a long time): "Why are you taking the coward's way out?" (His eyes tear up.)

Jill's question (or challenge) puts the ball in Justin's court. It's her way of asking Justin to take responsibility for his part of the session. Justin uses her challenge to challenge himself in a way he would never have done otherwise. Another example:

**Counselor:** What are some of the questions you need to ask yourself if you are to understand what's happening between you and your husband a little better?

**Client:** Hmmm. I think I'd have to ask myself: "What do *you* do that makes him want to drink all the time? What's your part in all this?" Those are unsettling questions for me.

Thus, another way to probe is to help clients ask relevant, even "impertinent," questions of themselves.

### Statements That Encourage Clients to Talk and Clarify

Prompts and probes do not have to be questions. With the same guidelines in mind, counselors can use *statements and requests* to help clients talk and clarify relevant issues. For example, an involuntary client may come in and then just sit there and fume. The helper probes with a statement:

**Helper:** I can see that you're angry, but I'm not entirely sure what it's about.

**Client:** As if you didn't know. It's you—you're so damn smug.

Of their very nature, probing statements make some demand on the client either to talk or to become more specific. They are indirect requests of clients to elaborate on their experiences, behaviors, or feelings.

**Helper:** I realize now that you often get angry when your mother-in-law stays for more than a day. But I'm still not sure what she does that makes you angry.

**Client:** First of all, she throws our household schedule out and puts in her own.

In these examples, the helper's statement places a demand on the client to clarify the *experiences* that give rise to certain behaviors and feelings.

Consider another example.

**Helper:** The Sundays your husband exercises his visiting rights with the children end in his taking verbal pot shots at you, and you get these headaches. I've got a fairly clear picture of what he does when he comes over, but it might help if you could describe what you do.

**Client:** Well, I don't do anything.

**Helper:** Last Sunday, he just started making comments about you.

**Client:** I asked him about increasing the child support payments. And I might have asked him why he's dragging his feet about getting a better job.

Another example:

**Helper:** When the diagnosis of cancer came in two weeks ago, you said that you were both relieved—because you knew what you had to face—and depressed. You've mentioned that your behavior has been a bit chaotic since then. Tell me what you've been doing.

**Client:** I've been to the lawyer to get a will drawn up. I'm trying to get all my business affairs in order. I've been writing letters to relatives and friends. I've been on the phone a lot. . . . I've been burying my anger and fright by filling my days with lots of activity, from beginning to end.

In the last two instances the helper encourages the client to describe his or her *behavior* as a way of giving greater clarity to the problem situation.

A final example:

**Helper:** When you talk about your wife and what she does, you use fairly positive emotions. For instance, you "appreciate" it when she points out the mistakes you make. I haven't heard any negative or mixed feelings yet. Maybe there are none.

**Client:** I think you probably know I get them buried. I see no advantage to blowing up and just making myself feel worse.

Here the helper's statement provides the client with an opportunity to discuss the *feelings* that go with his experiences and behaviors.

### Interjections That Help Clients to Focus

A prompt or probe need not be a full question or a statement. It can be a word or phrase that helps focus the client's attention on the discussion.

**Client:** My son and I have a fairly good working relationship now, even though I'm not entirely satisfied.

**Helper:** Not entirely satisfied?

**Client:** Well, I should probably say "dissatisfied" because . . .

Another example:

**Client:** At the end of the day, what with the kids and dinner and cleaning up, I'm bushed.

**Helper:** Bushed?

**Client:** Tired, angry, hurt—he and the kids do practically nothing to help me!

In these cases the probe helps clients say more fully what they are only half saying.

Even such responses as “uh-huh,” “mmm,” “yes,” “I see,” “ah,” and “oh,” as well as nods and the like, can serve as prompts, provided they are used intentionally and are not a sign that the helper's attention is flagging.

**Client:** There are a lot of things I don't like about my lifestyle. (Pause)

**Helper:** Uh-huh.

**Client:** For instance, I spend too much time working and too much time by myself when I'm not working.

Interjections can also be nonverbal.

**Client:** I don't know if I can tell you this. I haven't told it to anyone.

(**Helper** maintains good eye contact and leans forward a bit.)

**Client:** Well, my brother had sexual relations with me a few times a couple of years ago. I think about it all the time.

In Chapter 5 I suggested that you become aware of the messages your nonverbal behavior communicates. With that awareness, you can progress to using nonverbal forms of communication to prompt the client to explore the problem situation in greater detail.

### Some Cautions in the Use of Probes

It is probably clear that prompts and probes, both verbal and nonverbal, can be overused to the detriment of both the helping relationship and the steps of the helping process. In keeping with the values of Chapters 3 and 4, use probes to help increase rather than decrease the client's initiative. If you extort information with a constant barrage of probes and prompts, clients are unlikely to take more and more responsibility for problem solving and opportunity development. Therefore, after using a probe, use basic empathy rather than another probe or series of probes as a way of encouraging further exploration. After all, if a probe is effective, it will yield information that needs to be listened to and understood.

In the following example, the client is a young Chinese-American woman whose father died in China and whose mother is now dying in the United States. She has been talking about the traditional obedience of Chinese women and her fears of slipping into a form of passivity in her

American life. She talks about her sister, who, in traditional Chinese fashion, seems to give everything to her husband without looking for anything in return.

**Counselor:** Are these tendencies to passivity rooted in your genes?

**Client:** Sometimes I think so. They seem to be in my cultural genes. And yet I look around and see many of my American counterparts adopt a different style. Last year, when I took a trip back to China with my mother to meet my half-sisters, the moment I landed I wasn't American. I was Chinese again.

**Counselor A:** What did you learn there?

**Client:** That I was Chinese!

**Counselor B:** So part of it is, perhaps, being loyal to your heritage.

**Client:** While still being loyal to myself. Both are important. I don't want to be passive, but my trip told me I do not want to lose the values of my roots—at least not the best of them.

Counselor A, instead of responding with empathy to what the client has said, follows the probe with another question, and the client ends up repeating herself emphatically. Counselor B uses empathy to seize on a core message and so helps the client move forward.

Bob Carkhuff, in a workshop, suggested that if helpers find themselves asking two questions in a row, it might be that they have just asked two stupid questions. Prompts and probes are the salt and pepper of communication in the helping process. They should remain condiments judiciously used and not become the main course. Box 6-2 presents a checklist for effective probing.

### THE LIMITS OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

One of the reasons I have separated a discussion of the basic communication skills from the steps of the helping process is my feeling that helpers tend to overidentify the helping process with the communication skills that serve it. This is true not only of attending, listening, empathy, and probing, but also of the skills of challenging to be treated in Chapter 8. Being good at communication skills is not the same as being good at helping. Moreover, an overemphasis on communication skills can make helping a great deal of talk with very little action. Technique can replace substance. Communication skills are essential, of course, but they still must serve the outcomes of the helping process. As we proceed through the helping model, ways of using communication skills to produce these outcomes will be illustrated.

**BOX 6-2 Suggestions for the Use of Probes**

1. Keep in mind the goals of probing:
  - a. To help nonassertive or reluctant clients tell their stories and engage in other behaviors related to the helping process.
  - b. To help clients remain focused on relevant and important issues.
  - c. To help clients identify experiences, behaviors, and feelings that give a fuller picture of the issue at hand.
  - d. To help clients understand themselves and their problem situations more fully.
2. Use a mix of probing statements, open-ended questions, and interjections.
3. Do not engage clients in question-and-answer sessions.
4. If a probe helps a client reveal relevant information, follow it up with basic empathy rather than another probe.
5. Use whatever judicious mixture of empathy and probing is needed to help clients clarify problems, identify blind spots, develop new scenarios, search for action strategies, formulate plans, and review outcomes of action.
6. Remember that probing is a communication tool that is effective to the degree that it serves the stages and steps of the helping process.

**Becoming Proficient at Communication Skills**

Understanding communication skills and how they fit into the helping process is one thing. Becoming proficient in their use is another. Doing the exercises in the manual that accompanies this book and gaining practice in counselor-training groups can help, but these activities are not enough to incorporate empathy into your communication style. Empathy that is trotted out, as it were, for helping encounters is likely to have a hollow ring. These skills cannot be gimmicks. They must become part of your everyday communication style. After providing some initial training in these skills, I tell students, "Now, go out into your real lives and get good at these skills. I can't do that for you. But you cannot be certified in this program unless and until you demonstrate competency in these skills." Microskills training is just the first step in a process that must lead to these skills becoming second nature (Patterson, 1988).

**Beyond Communication Skills: The Helping Process Itself**

Some make too much of the communication skills needed in helping—especially empathy—expecting them to carry most of the helping burden. Kierulff's (1988) almost chilling experience reinforces this point.

A young man (whom I will call John) attempted to rob a bar. He and his older partner carried loaded shotguns, but the bartender was armed and quick on the draw, and John was shot. The . . . bullet severed John's spine; his legs collapsed under him, and he was left paraplegic. When he was taken to the hospital, he was assigned to me for psychotherapy.

John and I talked for hours, day after day, as he lay prone in his hospital bed. This 20-year-old armed robber fascinated me. He lied to me straightfaced. He portrayed himself as a victim. He changed his story whenever he thought he could gain an advantage. . . . He displayed no loyalty, no honor, no compassion. He trusted no one, and he displayed not even a crumb of trustworthiness. He used everyone, including me.

I had not dealt with any sociopaths before interacting with John. . . . I believed that Rogerian unconditional positive regard would eventually work its wonders and soften John's tough shell, allowing me to connect with him on a level of mutual empathy, caring, and respect.

"You can't change these people," my supervisor admonished. . . . I hoped that my supervisor was wrong. I kept on trying, but when the internship was over and I said goodbye to John, I could tell from the look in his eyes that in spite of the extra concern I had shown him, in spite of my warmth and care and effort, I was just another in the long list of people he had coldly manipulated and discarded. (p. 436)

In the ensuing article, Kierulff muses on the meaning of and the relationship between free will and determinism and what kind of treatment is needed to get through to "guiltless, manipulative people." His response is one that does not tolerate the helper's being conned and one that places demands for responsibility on such clients.

Johnson and Heppner (1989) are right in maintaining that effective counseling is more than the application of a range of skills. Counselors need to help clients process and use the information gathered through their dialogues at the service of problem-managing outcomes. The rest of this book provides that framework, that is, the problem-solving/opportunity-developing process itself. Like communication skills, the helping model, too, must become second nature. And so we turn now to its stages and steps.