



EMPATHY PULSE

I am a therapeutic counsellor with 10 years of experience during which I published a number of articles^{1 2 3} highlighting my empathic competence working with traumatised clients. Empathy is a detox for the crushed spirit, yet evidence of empathy deficit in society is everywhere we turn.⁴ A bleak landscape indeed, however, empathic oases do exist. For example, empathic understanding of the kind that the person-centred therapist seeks to offer is the result of the most intense concentration and requires a form of attentive listening which is remarkably rare.⁵ To practice counselling empathically, safely and ethical, especially when working with highly charged feelings and complex emotions, can be challenging, rewarding and transformational for both client and counsellor. Counselling can be a vibrant experience carrying an intensity of relating which in itself is a major vehicle for therapeutic change.⁶

To maintain an objective distance might seem logical while being present with a person seeking to unravel from emotional waves of terror, shame and guilt. However, that logic is not justified. What is necessary is a willingness to accompany a lonely person to the numbness of their isolation. That said, no therapist can confidently invite his client to travel further than he himself has journeyed.⁷ The engaging, explorational and healing vessel that counselling is, requires an ability to offer empathic ventures whole-heartedly, anything less is mediocre in its application. Perhaps that is why the world is full of helpers whose activity is a desperate strategy to avoid confronting themselves.⁸

Change and transition are the axis around which the counselling process revolves. The initial consultation is a great opportunity to nudge empathy into center stage. When empathy guides the interaction, it is possible to judge with surprising accuracy how fast or how slow the other person needs to go. Timing is everything.⁹ By calibrating my empathic pulse to a client's emotional beat, accurate timing can be achieved. For empathy thrives on visceral dexterity enabling safe navigation of the complex cycle of avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation.¹⁰ The empathic compass is always orientated towards sensory and feeling impulses because when feelings become known to the self within the organism that processes them, feelings improve and amplify the process of managing life.¹¹

The wash of emotional tears is highly cleansing, in its own right, even if crying is a sign of helplessness¹², it can relieve stress and depression.¹³ I believe this releasing action can also present glimpses of the serrated contours of banished hurt. No matter how creative the denial and distortion matrix has evolved to protect self, countless echoes of suffering will continue to escape and warp at the threshold of awareness. Tears aside, empathy can stand on its own to liberate clients from incongruent existence. However, I believe therapeutic tears complement empathic encounters by softening ridged consciousness to ensure organismic growth can flourish. Furthermore, such enriching experiences are deeply enhanced when encountered within a counselling relationship that offers a unique style of relating. That is, effective counselling is often a highly intuitive activity that intuition refers to sensitive judgements that have become internalised and appear in highly skilled and experienced hands effortless.¹⁴

Speaking as a seasoned traveller, I believe fear lurks large in preventing ventures into turbulent waters. I have identified two crucial aspects maintaining superficial involvement – poor empathic development and low emotional investment. The

therapist enters the client's perceptual world 'as if' it is his or her own but without ever losing the capacity to return to his or her own moorings.¹⁵ Like the revolving beam of a lighthouse, the *as if* quality of empathy remains constant, a distant power source, safely guiding the close separation. Listening is the backbone to empathic encounters and emotional vitality supports this process. The quality of energy offered, determines emotional empowerment outcomes. As intuition is a foreign language to ego, emotional resonance is alien to logic. Low level emotional underpinning results in poor practitioner's performance. I have coined the term a *courageously sensitive presence* to draw attention to the interconnecting physical and intuitive realms supporting intra and inter-subjective relating. I define a courageously sensitive presence as being fully present, in touch with the intuitive, emotional, feeling, thinking, creative and spiritual selves. Moreover, a courageously sensitive presence is a highly resilient, resourceful and respectful mode of professional aptitude. Maintaining a courageously sensitive presence, optimally promotes emotional transformational possibilities beyond measured success. I believe the intersection, where traumatic waves meet emotional vitality, is a decisive boundary in the dissolving process. Emotional vigour is the centre of gravity that grounds empathy within the counselling process.

No wonder empathic understanding can be accomplished only by people who are secure enough in their own identity to move into another's world without the fear of being overwhelmed by it.¹⁶ Fear of uncertainty, especially around intuitive intimacy, reflects unwillingness to draw closer to the here-and-now gulf, thus keeping practitioners anchored in the harbour of avoidance. Clinging to the familiar landscape may appear reassuring, but that is not what counselling was created for. Counselling was crafted to stand out to sea, to brave troubled waters safely.

The important role of safety in our life is so intuitive and so relevant that it is surprising that our institutions neglect it.¹⁷ However, polyvagal theory argues that our nervous system employs a hierarchy of strategies both, to regulate itself and to keep us safe, in the face of danger. In fact, it is all about staying safe.¹⁸ Safe environments are important for everything we do and especially for therapies.¹⁹ Polyvagal theory is a XXI-century appreciation of human organism and its nervous system, core of which constitutes a built-in hierarchy of autonomic responses, based on our phylogenetic history.²⁰

The spellbinding neuroscience that underpins polyvagal theory distils the organism's complex apparatuses (nervous system communicational networks), into a comprehensive expression of intuitive neuroception. Neuroception, distinct from perception...is detection without awareness,²¹ and interoception - respect for the feedback from our viscera to our brain.²² To my mind, neuroception pinpoints the subterranean realm of safety, while interoception draws attention to the unlimited safety alerts our body offers. Moreover, polyvagal theory demonstrates that our bodies, brains included, are designed to respond without thinking,²³ and as such, substantially refines our understanding of trauma.²⁴ Despite the fact that interest in our bodily feelings has been neglected and often disrespected in our contemporary society,²⁵ I have always striven to honour, cultivate and utilize mine. I believe the best resource in the battle against poor mental condition is an organism freely accessing experience. It is not about being self-centred, it is about having a self that is congruently centred.

Person-centered psychology champions a high level of acceptance, trust and learning from positive and negative experiences. This is the bedrock to being congruent. Congruence opens the portal to maintaining unconditional positive regard/prizing and communicating empathy (empathic prizing). Empathic prizing constitutes the therapeutic art of counselling. To absorb, articulate and understand better my organismic experiences, I found a high degree of intuitive confidence in aligning the sensory and visceral focus, highlighted in person-centered theory, with

the following definition: the interactions between the central nervous system and the autonomic nervous system could be called the empathetic nervous system, for the ongoing communication between these systems is responsible for all the expressions of empathy used to signal our thoughts and feelings to each other. Empathy is, in fact, an integrated mind-body response in which thoughts interact with feelings in an empathetic nervous system response.²⁶ Polyvagal theory substantially validates my professional credentials, intuition and encourages my empathic engagement endeavour with traumatised clients.

Methodical research builds the ship, imagination sails it.
Abraham Eraly

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