

Supporting ourselves and others

Sympathy and empathy: what is the difference?

- **Sympathy** - implies feeling sorry for someone - not always a useful emotion or helpful to the other person
- **Empathy** - implies understanding by being one step removed from a situation. This enables more constructive and appropriate help and support, and removes some unhelpful emotions that could cloud your judgment.

Examples

Sympathy ...is when we jump in the water to save a drowning man - endangering our own safety as much as the person drowning.

Empathy ...is when we keep our distance on firm ground and offer a safety line from a distance.

Touch or not to touch ...some people can feel so vulnerable that comforting by touch can be sufficient for them to feel they may lose control and dissolve into tears.

'Protecting' ourselves

Distancing and detaching from emotional situations...

To distance or detach yourself from emotional situations ...you might find it helpful to:

Example 1

Imagine that this is a play in a theatre and the person in distress is on stage playing a part. You can remain detached from the emotional state of the players on stage by keeping yourself at a distance. The further away you can view this from the audience - the less you will engage with your own emotions.

Example 2

Pat the centre of your chest slowly and rhythmically with the palm of your hand and count the pats. This reduces the adrenaline rush we have when we are upset or distressed. It also helps at the same time to say to yourself - 'I'm okay ...I feel calm and relaxed'.

Example 3

Breathe in through your nose to the count of 4, then breathe out through the mouth to the count of 4. **Repeat** - this time breathing in to the count of 4 but only breathe out to the count of 2. Stop for 1 to 2 seconds, then, continue breathing out. This counteracts the adrenaline rush and helps to calm the feeling of distress.

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Listening skills

- Give total attention when one person is speaking, (eye contact, stillness, attention, body language)
- Avoid interruptions and giving advice (very tempting - however, this may stop their train of thought)
- Hearing what has been said. When the speaker has finished, repeat what you think they have meant
- Avoid offering solutions (even if you have been in a similar situation yourself). It may not be a good solution for others. It may also stop their train of thought
- Remember silence is okay! (Especially if someone is gathering their thoughts to make sense of what they are trying to convey). Silence is also useful when someone is upset - it conveys acceptance of their feelings - for example of grief - rather than disapproval.

Accessing support

Personal and group support (during and after the training finishes)

- Think carefully and seek advice about how much it is appropriate for you to disclose/ want to disclose about yourself
- Talk and debrief after the event before returning home
- Support from colleagues
- Training.

Who can support you? NB: remember confidentiality issues!

- You may have a close friend or partner who is a good listener and who is willing to support you (someone you feel safe with and who will be there for you)
- You may work in a place where experienced staff are accessible and with whom you can share your thoughts and experiences
- You may belong to a church, luncheon club or voluntary organisation where someone may be interested in your project and your involvement
- You may know a GP, community nurse or other health or social care professional to discuss and share the project with
- You may like to think about sharing your telephone number, email address, so you can help support each other after the training programme has finished
- Consider arranging for one to one support and group discussions, with time set aside after meetings, to reflect and support each other.