

EMPATHETIC LISTENING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY: ITS IMPACT ON BUILDING THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE AND CLIENT TRUST

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Abstract

Active listening is one of the critical components of psychotherapy since it is the foundation for the development of the therapeutic relationship and trust. This paper aims at analyzing empathic listening in relation to these two fundamental elements of counselling. In light of available empirical research studies and the theoretical analysis of the literature over the past five years, this paper explains how empathetic listening strengthens the therapeutic alliance and hence improves on therapy outcomes. Some of the working models which include atonement, validation, and emotional regulation are examined to explain how empathetic listening works in therapy. Exploring the difficulties of empathic listening also reveals the problem of therapist burnout and misinterpretation of the sufferer. Proposed modifications of current practice skills, include increasing training, checking and reflecting on own listening and responding to clients' feedback. The paper stresses the importance of developing and honing the listening skills with an empathetic approach that specifies the relationship between empathy and the development of a therapeutic environment. The implications highlighted here point out that the act of empathetic listening not only fosters trust and working alliance but also enhances client's agency as it bears great significance for the therapeutic process.

Keywords: Empathetic Listening, Psychotherapy, Therapeutic Relationship, Client Trust

1. Introduction

Therapists have a great duty to engage in active listening that is empathic during psychotherapy to create rapport and gain trust from the client (Elliott et al., 2018). In the next paper the author highlights the process that leads to these outcomes through the process of empathetic listening by analysing the current empirical research and theoretical frameworks.

Empathy which is one of the foundational core conditions in the therapeutic relationship refers to the identification, acknowledgment, and endorsement of the client's experienced emotions by the therapist (Elliott et al., 2018). This profound and attentive listening is at the core of the development of the working alliance with the client, which is the key to therapy efficacy (Norcross & Wampold, 2018). The empathic listening, or the relationship between the therapist and the client and how positively they work together is defined as the therapeutic alliance and turns out that the latter directly depends on the listening skills of the former (Flückiger et al., 2018).

Empathetic listening also increases the likelihood of client trust concerning critical aspects that would help in treatment and would make a client more cooperative in therapy (Levitt, Pomerville, & Surace, 2016). Genuine clients' trust enables them to feel protected and heard to undergo profound therapeutic processes (Bachelor, 2013). This paper will discuss how empathetic listening affects therapeutic relationships and clients' trust based on research studies that have been done in the last five years.

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of empathetic listening

Listening to the client in psychotherapy involves not only words but also an abortive understanding of the client's feelings and the hidden symbolism (Rogers, 1957). This process involves cognitive and affective components: The second essence, entering the client's attachment, means to understand the client's or patient's view of the world and his emotions (Greenberg, Elliott & Lietaer, 1994, p. 1087).

Modern researches have proved that that empathic listening skills are crucial. For instance, Murphy and Joseph (2018) revealed that compared to a non-empathic condition, the therapists who practiced empathic listening had enhanced therapeutic relationships and improved clients' status. On this regard the aforementioned postulation about empathy

harmonizes with the traditional perspective asserting that empathy is a core component of therapy's process (Rogers 1957).

Also, this aspect of empathetic listening enhances the therapist's timely provision of accurate empathy that is helpful in therapy. Most studies of empathy recognize that it is not only an ability to identify the client's experiences of the world but also to communicate that understanding back to the client (Greenberg & Geller, 2001). This feedback loop makes the clients feel that they have been understood which is critical in establishing trust with the counsellor (Murphy & Joseph, 2018).

2.2. Building therapeutic alliance through empathetic listening

Therapists' personal characteristics is taken to be the central variable linking to outcomes of therapies since it is scientifically acknowledged that the alliance is one of the strongest positive predictors of the results of therapy (Norcross & Wampold, 2018). Through compassionate listening, this alliance of the psychosocial capacity is enhanced since there is always a feeling of teaming up. As clients experience empathy from their therapists, they are likely to participate in therapy, be compliant with their therapists' recommendations and exert efforts to meet intended goals (Flückiger et al., 2018).

Empathetic listening was positively associated with therapeutic alliance according to Elliott, Bohart, Watson, and Murphy's (2018) study. Their results showed that clients who provided high ratings for the empathy of their therapists also had better alliance and therapeutic outcomes. Thus, this study lays emphasis on the need to be empathetic when establishing rapport with the patients.

Moreover, one can objectively manage breach, which is an occurrence of rupture in the therapeutic relationship. In this case, empathic listening enables therapists to detect areas of misunderstandings or discrepancies, and subsequently, work on the alliance in their therapy effectively (Safran & Muran, 2000). The dynamic process in play here is instrumental in maintaining the stability as well as efficiency of the therapeutic undertaking, and therefore of the therapeutic relationship.

2.3. Client trust and counsellor, active listening

Engagement can be defined as the process by which clients allocate the authority for diagnosis and treatment to the practitioner (Bachelor, 2013). Thus, empathetic listening builds trust because clients are provided with a safe and accepting environment within which they are listened to (Levitt et al., 2016). It has been noted that in a scenario where clients somehow capture the trust of their therapists, it will be easy for the clients to open up on what is happening within them, as this is the secret to therapy.

Levitt, Pomerville, and Surace's (2016) investigation also herein showed that empathetic listening was positively associated with client trust. More insistence, those clients who felt that their therapists were empathetic were more comfortable to express themselves and disclose personal information that they deemed as sensitive. This led me to understate the centrality of empathy into the creation of and sustenance of the client trust.

In addition, the use of empathetic listening reduces clients' worries or concerns they might have towards the process of therapy. Through the process of getting clients to understand and accept such thoughts, therapists

help allay such clients' worries and foster the kinds of contexts that are capable of generating openness and explorations (Bachelor, 2013). This process of building trust is necessary if one is to attain the desired therapeutic aims.

2.4. Mechanisms of Empathetic Listening

The knowledge about the processes by which empathetic listening influences the therapeutic relationship and the clients' trust is thus crucial for improving the practice of therapists. Yet one of them is the atonement with the therapist aligning with the client's affect and their experience (Schore, 2003). Engagement thus creates empathy which in turn strengthens the concept of alliance that is important in treatment.

Another mechanism is validation and here the therapist, validates or confirms the clients' feelings and experiences (Linehan, 1993). Through validation, clients' self-perception is challenged and they feel understood and honoured, therefore increasing their confidence in the therapist and the therapeutic process. Murphy and Joseph (2018) affirm this contention and using research data argue that validation that comes with empathic listening promotes the enhancement of therapeutic alliances and improved client's progress.

Also, empathetic listening helps in modulating of the affect. This allows the clients to ventilate on emotions that they may be experiencing hence allowing the therapists to assist them deal with the emotions in the right manner (Greenberg & Watson, 2006). All this emotional regulation as we can deduce is imperative for the therapeutic processes and client's welfare.

2.5. Challenges and limitations of empathetic listening

That being said, empathetic listening is incredibly effective but has its drawbacks and restrictions as well. One limitation is the lack of ability of the therapist to provide empathy in regular operations and, sometimes, when encountering noncooperative patients (Elliott et al., 2018). It is important that the therapist demonstrate warmth but not cross over into enmeshment with the client's life.

The third weakness, relates to the way empathetic listening can in fact be misconstrued. People might think that they are being patronised or not being told the truth when practising empathy, it must be done in a genuine and proper manner (Levitt et al., 2016). Therapists should avoid nonverbal adoption, and the voice should be friendly and condescending while considering that the patient receives the therapist's empathy.

Moreover, the choice underlines the fact that for some clients, empathetic listening is not enough. While engaged in the therapeutic process with a client, a counsellor might apply more specific behavior directed kind of a method or, on the contrary, a solution-focused method due to the client's needs and the goal of therapy (Norcross & Wampold, 2018). This means that the listening style of therapists has to be variable as they need to fit the client's environment.

2.6. Enhancing empathetic listening in therapeutic practice

In a bid to encourage empathic listening in therapeutic work, the therapists can enrol for constant practice and reflect on their work. Several training programs for therapists are designed to enhance interpersonal skills, one of which is empathy; thus, programs that enhance empathetic listening skills are helpful (Murphy & Joseph, 2018). Supervisory feedback and/or peer review may also yield Guidance and encouragement.

Another area should be the subject of self-reflection which is also important for increasing the level of empathetic listening. Self-awareness is of elemental importance to the client-oriented approach of the therapist as far as listening skills are concerned (Rogers, 1957). Mindfulness practices in addition to personal therapy can be effective ways that can help in improving one's self-awareness and self-emotional regulation.

Also, the involvement of the client in therapy enhances the empathetic listening part of the process. Clients' opinions of the therapeutic process may help to elucidate the ways in which the perceived empathy of the therapist operates (Levitt et al., 2016). Such feedback can help therapists analyze what kind of listening behaviour suits the clients best and adapt it in order to satisfy the clients.

3. Case study

These problem areas were chronic anxiety and relationships' problems, for which the participant, a 35-year-old man named John, came to therapy. In the process of counselling, Dr. Smith, patient's therapist, applied empathic listening as one of the main tactics. In the beginning of the story John, therefore, came out with his concern towards therapy stating his worry of prejudice and misinterpretation. Dr. Smith's listening empowered John, making him feel understood and accepted that led to the positive therapeutic relationship (Elliott et al., 2018).

John was able to remember an unhappy episode from his childhood that he had never disclosed to anyone before during one of the sessions. Thus, Dr. Smith's ability to listen carefully to John and carefully respond in kind engendered a profound sense of received understanding that might help explain the strength of the alliance (Flückiger et al., 2018). That alliance was important that made John to be more involved in the process of exploring his feelings and experiences more than before that made the therapeutic process to be more collaborative as emphasized by Norcross and Wampold (2018).

Over the course of therapy, Dr. Smith's empathetic interest fostered trust necessary for John to engage in discussion of his anxieties and problems in romantic relationships (Levitt et al., 2016). The example of empathetic listening's benefits was observed in the regulation of John's emotions during the sessions as he did not have any feeling of judgment, which is crucial in any type of therapy (Greenberg & Watson, 2006).

However, there were challenges. Sometimes John got confused with the doctor's friendly response as such the goal of empathy was balanced gently so that it did not elicit a feeling of pity from the doctor (Levitt et al., 2016). To this, Dr. Smith responded by pointing out such feelings to John and explaining to him that hiding such feelings is not good for one and that therapy is good for such disclosures (Murphy & Joseph, 2018).

In the course of the continuous practice and personal growth, Dr. Smith enhanced not only the utilitarian, but also the genuinely compassionate approach towards interpersonal listening (Murphy & Joseph, 2018). John's case elucidates how an act of empathetic listening evolves a professional-client relationship and enhances the client's confidence in the professional, and this kind of listening enhances therapeutic progress for the client. Thus, the continuous application of the empathetic listening when also addressed as critical aspect of the psychotherapy showed how it encouraged the emotional release and enabled the active participation to the therapeutic process of John.

4. Discussion

As a form of active listening, empathy has the potential to enhance the working alliance and build trust with clients in psychotherapy. It was expressing the findings from the recent researches which point towards the role of the clinical milieu for establishing constructive and efficient therapeutic setting. For example, a study by Elliott et al. (2018) shows that relationship focus is boosted by other-focused listening as it helps clients to feel appreciated. From this alignment with clients' emotions and life situations, I get to establish rapport with the clients, which is crucial in attaining optimal therapeutic processes (Norcross and Wampold, 2018).

Empathetic listening also has a direct bearing on the clients' level of trust as is an important component in the therapy process. Levitt et al. (2016) have shown that the clients reveal more and are more open with the therapists they regard as empathic which leads to trust. This trust allows the clients to really get involved in their therapy in order to bring about the desired change.

The processes that lie at the foundation of empathetic listening like Cu, Cw, and Cr is indeed critical to the therapeutic processes. Becoming as one body through the process of tracking leads to the therapist's strong identification with the client's feelings (Schore 2003). Empathy strengthens and promotes the clients' involvement in the therapeutic process, therefore validation acceptance, and acceptance of the clients' emotions is an important aspect of DBT (Linehan, 1993; Murphy & Joseph, 2018). In CBT, it is said that clients are able to regulate their own emotions due to provision of safe client counsellor relationship.

However, the limitations that are attributed to therapist burn out and possible misunderstanding of the meaning of empathy need to be dealt with. Counsellors should regularly update their knowledge and introspect

and should be able to provide empathic listening (Murphy & Joseph, 2018). Introducing the client feedback option could also assist therapists in modifying their manner to fit the clients' needs as perceived right.

Thus, it could be stated that empathy, as listening, is a crucial factor in psychotherapy. It goes as far as supporting the client partnership and building up client-belief and also it supports clients in attaining their healing goals. Therefore, the increased focus on empathetic listening both in the continuing education of the practitioners and with the clients can greatly enhance the outcomes of the therapy and thus, underlines the importance of being empathetic for psychotherapeutic work.

5. Conclusion

Active listening is crucial in psychotherapy since it has a significant impact on establishing empathy and trust between the therapist and a client. This picture is very much present in the current literature exploring the implications of positive attitudes in the patient and the therapist, which shows its value in enabling a cooperative, constructive working alliance that is crucial for effective treatment. Empathetic listening, that includes atonement, validation and emotional regulation, increases the sense of the clients' vulnerability and strengthens their commitment to the therapeutic process. Despite the above-mentioned barrier like; therapist fatigue and a possibility of the clients misconstruing the intention behind empathy, the above measures can be put in place to avoid a repeat of the same. Finally, empathetic listening increases the therapist-client relationship and ensure that the clients are engaged in the therapeutic process, which leads to positive change. Drawing from the work of competent reviewers Emmons (2010) has pointed that defective empathetic listening skills is one of the most frequent mistakes of therapists and the consistent application and the constant improvement of these skills is one of the most important objectives of a therapist who has the desire to construct an optimal therapeutic climate.

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