

Sympathetic Empathy

In listening to myself in others, when others use listening skills empathetically with me, it creates a subtly hostile feeling. I might have said, "It's been a tough day," with the person responding appropriately with, "That can be so frustrating." That should feel like a very supportive statement, yet my first reaction is irritation. I wonder how that response could be irritating to me, a person who teaches listening skills. Well, it feels somehow controlling. Controlling in the way the person perceived my feelings. Maybe the perception of my feelings feels threatening to me, for am not I a creature of our culture...where control is everything, and loss of it the worst?

It has been deeply upsetting to me to react that way to the listening skills when shared with me by a concerned other. In a conversation the other day with a mentor, I brought this experience up and I was able to explore it with her. Initially it was embarrassing for me to share it, yet I felt relieved more than embarrassed, and that was good. What came out of the conversation was that even though the statement by the respondent, "That can be so frustrating," is empathetically correct, it may be too direct. It may be the quality of directness that is putting me off. It doesn't give me the time to correct my cultural response, which of course is to deny the "accusation" of having a loss of self-control, i.e. the "frustration."

Perhaps it would sound more acceptable to my cultural ear to hear the person say something like this, "Yeah, I've known tough days, and they can really be something else. Sometimes I feel so tired, and then it's easy for me to be frustrated and irritated." It feels more roundabout, not so direct, and not so irritating.

Another reason for my "unreasonable" irritation with the empathetic statement is that it subtly places the responsibility of the feeling on my shoulders. Somehow the response doesn't project the other person's acceptance of responsibility for my feelings of frustration. Let's look at another example:

Initiator: "Why didn't you call me?"

Respondent: "It must feel frustrating that I didn't call."

The person initiating would feel like, "Yeah, duh...brilliant for you to catch on..."

Instead the respondent might say something like, "I have been thoughtless, and I don't mean to be. I'll definitely make an effort to be more thoughtful and less frustrating. I'll make every effort to call more often."

To me, it seems that this response projects the feeling that the respondent is willing to take responsibility. The first empathetic response of "It must feel frustrating..." projects that the initiator is somehow guilty. It is subtle, yet the statement does place the feeling of "frustration" on the initiator, and the respondent doesn't express any direct connection or responsibility for the conflict.

It seems critical that in hearing the empathetic response the initiating person needs to feel that the respondent assumes responsibility for the upsetting feeling being felt by the initiator of the conversation. When that is in place, the initiator can safely accept the empathetic response and feel the support that the respondent means to project in speaking empathetically.