Interrupting. I am reluctant to add "interrupting," as some do, to this list of shadow-side obstacles to effective listening. Certainly, when helpers interrupt their clients, they, by definition, stop listening. And interrupters often say things they have been rehearsing, which means that they have been only partially listening. My reluctance, however, comes from the conviction that the helping conversation should be a dialogue. There are benign and malignant forms of interrupting. The helper who cuts the client off in mid-thought to say something important is using a malignant form. But the case is different when a helper "interrupts" a monologue with some gentle gesture and a comment such as, "You've made several points. I want to make sure that I've understood them." When interrupting promotes the kind of dialogue that serves the problem-management process, it is useful. Still, care must be taken to factor in cultural differences in storytelling.

One possible reason counselors fall prey to these kinds of shadow-side listening is the unexamined assumption that listening with an open mind is the same as approving what the client is saying. This, of course, is not the case. Rather, listening with an open mind helps you learn and understand. Whatever the reason for shadow-side listening, the outcome can be devastating because of a truth philosophers learned long ago—a small error in the beginning can lead to huge errors down the road. If the foundation of a building is out of kilter, it is hard to notice with the naked eye. But, by the time construction reaches the ninth floor, it begins to look like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Tuning in to clients and listening both actively and with an open mind are foundation counseling skills. Ignore them and dialogue is impossible.

Myths About Nonverbal Behavior

Myths about behavior are part of the shadow side. Richmond and McCroskey (2000) spell out the shadow side of nonverbal behavior in terms of commonly held myths (pp. 2–3):

1. *Nonverbal communication is nonsense. All communication involves language. Therefore, all communication is verbal.* This myth is disappearing. It does not stand up under the scrutiny of common sense.
2. *Nonverbal behavior accounts for most of the communication in human interaction.* Early studies tried to "prove" this, but they were biased. Studies were aimed at dispelling myth number 1 and overstepped their boundaries.
3. *You can read a person like a book.* Some people, even some professionals, would like to think so. You can read nonverbal behavior, verbal behavior, and context and still be wrong.
4. *If a person does not look you in the eye while talking to you, he or she is not telling the truth.* Tell this to liars! The same nonverbal behavior can mean many different things.
5. *Although nonverbal behavior differs from person to person, most nonverbal behaviors are natural to all people.* Cross-cultural studies give the lie to this. But it isn't true even within the same culture.
6. *Nonverbal behavior stimulates the same meaning in different situations.* Too often the context is the key. Yet some professionals buy the myth and base interpretive systems on it.

CHAPTER

6

Sharing Empathic Highlights: Communicating and Checking Understanding

RESPONDING SKILLS

Helpers listen to clients in order to respond to them at the service of a helping dialogue. As we have seen, the logic of listening includes visibly tuning in to clients, listening actively, processing what is heard contextually, and identifying the key ideas, messages, or points of view clients are trying to communicate—all for the sake of understanding clients. Listening, then, is a very active process that serves understanding. But helpers also respond to clients in a variety of ways. They share their understanding, they check to make sure that they've got things right, they ask questions, they probe for clarity, and they challenge clients in a variety of ways. This chapter focuses on sharing empathic highlights as a way of both communicating understanding to clients and checking to see if that understanding is accurate. When helpers communicate accurate understanding to clients, they help their clients understand themselves more fully.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF RESPONDING SKILLS: PERCEPTIVENESS, KNOW-HOW, AND ASSERTIVENESS

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

Perceptiveness. Your responding skills are only as good as the accuracy of the perceptions on which you base them. Consider the difference between these two examples:

> Beth is counseling Frank in a community mental-health center. Frank is scared to talk about an "ethical blunder" that he made at work. Beth 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. In fact, he's startled by what she says and feels even more insecure. Beth takes his silence as a confirmation of his "anger." She tries to get him to talk about it.

Beth's perception is wrong and therefore disrupts the helping process. She misreads Frank's emotional state and tries to set a course based on her flawed perception. Contrast this to what happens in the following example:

> Mario, a manager, is counseling Enrique, a relatively new member of his team. During the past week, Enrique has made a significant contribution to a major project, but he has also made one rather costly mistake. Enrique's mind is on his blunder, not his success. Mario, sensing Enrique's discomfort, says, "Your ideas in the meeting last Monday helped us reconceptualize and reset the entire project. It was a great contribution. That kind of 'out of the box' thinking is very valuable here. (He pauses.) I'd also like to talk to you about Wednesday. Your conversation with Acme's purchasing agent on Wednesday made him quite angry. (He pauses briefly once more.) Something tells me that you might be more worried about Wednesday's mistake than delighted with Monday's contribution. I just wanted to let you know that I'm not." Enrique is greatly relieved. They go on to have a useful dialogue about what made Monday so good and what could be learned from Wednesday's blunder.

Mario's perceptiveness and his ability to defuse a tense situation lays the foundation for an upbeat dialogue.

The kind of perceptiveness you need to be a good helper comes from your basic intelligence, social intelligence, experience, reflecting on experience, developing

wisdom, and, more immediately, tuning in to your clients, listening carefully to what they have to say, and objectively processing what they say. Perceptiveness comes with social-emotional maturity.

Know-how. Once you are aware of what kind of response is called for, you need to be able to deliver it. For instance, even 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 you don't know how to translate your perceptions and your understanding into words. Let's return to Frank and Beth for a moment:

> Frank and Beth end up arguing about his "anger." Frank finally gets up and leaves. Beth, of course, takes this as a sign that she was right in the first place. The next day, Frank goes to see his minister. The minister sees quite clearly that Frank is scared and confused. His perceptions are right. He says something like this: "Frank, you seem to be very uncomfortable. It may be that whatever is on your mind might be difficult to talk about. But I'd be glad to listen to it, whatever it is. I don't want to push you into anything." Frank blurts out, "But I've done something terrible." The minister pauses and then says, "Well, let's see what kind of sense we can make of it." Frank hesitates a bit, then leans back into his chair, takes a deep breath, and launches into his story.

The minister not only is perceptive but also knows how to address Frank's anxiety and hesitation. The minister says to himself in his shadow conversation, "Here's a man who is almost exploding with the need to tell his story, but fear or shame or something like that is paralyzing him. How can I put him at ease, let him know that he won't get hurt here? I need to recognize his anxiety and gently offer an opening." He does not use these words, of course, but these are the kinds of sentiments that instinctively flit through his mind.

Assertiveness. Accurate perceptions and excellent know-how are meaningless if they remain locked up inside you. They need to become part of the therapeutic dialogue. For instance, if you see that self-doubt is a theme that weaves itself throughout a client's story about her frustrating search for a better relationship with her estranged brother but fail to share your hunch with her, you do not pass the assertiveness test. Consider this example:

> Nina, a young counselor in the Center for Student Development, is in the middle of the first session with Antonio, a graduate student. During the session, he mentions briefly a very helpful session he had the previous year with Carl, a middle-aged counselor on the staff. Carl has accepted an academic position at the university and is no longer involved with the center. Nina realizes that Antonio is disappointed that he couldn't see Carl and might have some misgivings about being helped by a new counselor—a younger woman at that. She has faced sensitive issues like this before and would not take it amiss if Antonio were to choose a different counselor. During a lull in the conversation, she says something like this: "Antonio, could we take a time-out here for a moment? I think you might be a bit disappointed to find out that Carl is no longer here. Or at least I probably would be if I were in your shoes. You were more or less just assigned to me and I'm not sure the fit is right. Maybe you can give that a bit of thought. Then, if you think I can be of help, you can schedule another meeting with me. But you're certainly free to review who is on staff and choose whomever you want."

In this case, perceptiveness, know-how, and assertiveness all come together. This is not to suggest that assertiveness is an overriding value in and of itself. To be assertive without perceptiveness and know-how is to court disaster.

Sharing Empathic Highlights: Communicating Understanding to Clients

"Feeling empathy" for others is not helpful if the helper's perceptions are not accurate. Ickes (1993, 1997) talked about "empathic accuracy," which he defined as "the ability to accurately infer the specific content of another person's thoughts and feelings" (1993, p. 588). According to Ickes, this ability is a component of success in many walks of life.

> Empathically accurate perceivers are those who are consistently good at "reading" other people's thoughts and feelings. All else being equal, they are likely to be the most tactful advisors, the most diplomatic officials, the most effective negotiators, the most electable politicians, the most productive salespersons, the most successful teachers, and the most insightful therapists. (1997, p. 2)

The assumption is, of course, that such people not only are accurate perceivers but can weave their perceptions into their dialogues with their constituents, customers, students, and clients. Helpers do this by sharing empathic highlights with their clients.

In previous editions of *The Skilled Helper*, the same word—*empathy*—was used to denote both the value described in Chapter 3 and the communication skill described in this chapter. To avoid any confusion, the communication skill involving helpers' sharing their understanding of clients' key experiences, behaviors, and feelings has been renamed *sharing empathic highlights*—or, more simply, sharing highlights. They are *empathic* because they are driven by the helper's desire to understand the client as fully as possible and to communicate this understanding. They are *highlights* because they focus on the key points the client is making. I still avoid such terms as *paraphrasing* and *restatement*. If you are truly empathic, if you listen actively, and if you thoughtfully process what you hear, putting what the client says in its proper context, then you do more than paraphrase or restate. There is something of *you* in your response. A good response is a product of caring and hard work. Good highlights are fully human, not mechanical.

If visibly tuning in and listening are the skills that enable helpers to get in touch with the world of the client, then sharing highlights is the skill that enables them both to communicate their understanding of that world and to check the accuracy of that understanding. A secure starting point in helping others is listening to them carefully, struggling to understand their concerns, and sharing that understanding with them.

Although many people may "feel empathy" for others—that is, are motivated in many different ways by the value of empathy described in Chapter 3—the truth is that few know how to put empathic understanding into words. And so sharing empathic highlights as a way of showing understanding during conversations remains an improbable event in everyday life. Perhaps that's why it is so powerful in helping settings. When clients are asked what they find helpful in counseling sessions, being understood gets top ratings. There is such an unfulfilled need to be understood.

The Key Building Blocks of Empathic Highlights

This section is a kind of anatomy lesson; that is, we are going to take the process of sharing highlights apart and look at the pieces. Further on, we'll put them back together again.

The Basic Formula

Basic empathic understanding can be expressed in the following stylized formula:

> ***You feel*** . . . [here name the correct emotion expressed by the client] . . .
>
> ***because*** . . . [here indicate the correct experiences and behaviors that give rise to the feelings].

For instance, Leonardo is talking with a helper about his arthritis and all its attendant ills. There is pain, of course, but more to the point, he can't get around the way he used to.

HELPER: You feel bad, not so much because of the pain but because your ability to get around—your freedom—has been curtailed.

LEONARDO: That's just it. I can take the pain. But not being able to get around is killing me! It's like being in jail.

They go on to discuss ways in which Leonardo, with the help of family and friends, can get out of "jail"—that is, become more mobile while finding ways of coping with the time he is in "jail."

The formula—"You feel . . . because . . ."—is a beginner's tool to get used to the concept of sharing highlights. It focuses on the key points of clients' stories, points of view, decisions, and proposals together with the relevant feelings, emotions, and moods associated with them. The formula is used in the following examples. For the moment, ignore how stylized it sounds. Ordinary human language will be substituted later. In the first example, a divorced mother with two young children is talking to a social worker about her ex-husband. She has been talking about the ways he has let her and their kids down.

CLIENT: I could kill him! He failed to take the kids again last weekend. This is three times out of the last six weeks.

HELPER: You feel furious because he keeps failing to hold up his part of the bargain.

CLIENT: I just have to find some way to get him to do what he promised to do. What he told the court he would do.

His not taking the kids according to their agreement (an experience for the client) infuriates her (an emotion). The helper captures both the emotion and the reason for it. And the client moves forward in terms of thinking about possible actions she could take.

In the next example, a woman who has been having a great deal of gastric and intestinal distress is going to have a colonoscopy. She is talking with a hospital counselor the night before the procedure.

PATIENT: God knows what they'll find when they go in. I keep asking questions, but they keep giving me vague answers.

HELPER: You feel troubled because you believe that you're being left in the dark.

PATIENT: In the dark about my body, my life! If they'd only tell me! Then I could prepare myself better.

They go on to discuss what she needs to do to get the kind of information she wants. The accuracy of the helper's response does not solve the woman's problems, but the patient does move a bit. She gets a chance to vent her concerns, receives a bit of understanding, and says why she wants the information. This perhaps puts her in a better position to ask for a more open relationship with her doctors.

The key elements of an empathic highlight are the same as the key elements of the client's story discussed in Chapter 5—that is, the experiences, behaviors, and feelings that make up that story. The next part of our "anatomy" lesson offers some guidelines.

Respond Accurately to Clients' Feelings, Emotions, and Moods

The importance of feelings, emotions, and moods in our lives was discussed in Chapter 5. Helpers need to respond to clients' emotions in such a way as to move the helping process forward. This means identifying key emotions the client either expresses or discusses (helper perceptiveness) and weaving them into the dialogue (helper know-how) even when they are sensitive or part of a messy situation (helper courage or assertiveness). Remember the last time you got a problem resolved with a good customer service representative? "I know you're angry right now because the package didn't arrive and you have every right to be. After all, we did make you a promise. Here's what we can do to make it right for you. . . ." Rather than ignoring the customer's emotions, good customer service reps face up to them as helpfully as possible.

Use the right family of emotions and the right intensity. In the basic highlight formula, "You feel . . ." should be followed by the correct family of emotions and the correct intensity.

> ***Family:*** The statements "You feel hurt," "You feel relieved," and "You feel enthusiastic" specify different families of emotion.
>
> ***Intensity:*** The statements "You feel annoyed," "You feel angry," and "You're furious" specify different degrees of intensity in the same family (anger).

The words *sad*, *mad*, *bad*, and *glad* refer to four of the main families of emotion, whereas *content*, *quite happy*, and *overjoyed* refer to different intensities within the *glad* family.

Distinguish between expressed and discussed feelings. Clients both *express* emotions they are feeling during the interview and *talk about* emotions they felt at the time of some incident. For instance, consider this interchange between a client involved in a child custody proceeding and a counselor. She is talking about her husband.

CLIENT (calmly): I get furious with him [affect] when he says things, little snide things, that suggest that I don't take good care of the kids [experience].

HELPER: You feel especially angry when he intimates that you're not a good mother.

The client isn't angry right now. Rather, she is talking about the anger. The following example deals with expressed rather than discussed feelings. This woman is talking about one of her colleagues at work.

CLIENT (enthusiastically): I threw caution to the wind and confronted him about his sarcasm [action] and it actually worked. He not only apologized but behaved himself the rest of the trip [experiences for the client].

HELPER: You feel great because you took a chance and it paid off.

Clients don't always name their feelings and emotions. However, when they express emotions, it is part of the message and needs to be identified and understood.

Read and respond to feelings and emotions embedded in clients' nonverbal behavior. Often helpers have to read their clients' emotions—both the family and the intensity—in their nonverbal behavior. In the following example, a North American college student sits down, looks at the floor, hunches over, and haltingly begins talking with a counselor:

CLIENT: I don't even know where to start. (He falls silent.)

HELPER: It's pretty clear that you're feeling miserable. Can we talk about why?

CLIENT (after a pause): Well, let me tell you what happened. . . .

He appears depressed (affect), and his nonverbal behavior indicates that the feelings are quite intense. His nonverbal behavior reveals the broad family ("You feel bad") and the intensity ("You feel very bad"). Of course, what experiences and behaviors gave rise to these emotions are not yet known.

Be sensitive in naming emotions. Naming and discussing feelings threatens some clients. In such cases, 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 35! 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 the feeling that down deep you were furious.

CLIENT: Well, I don't know about that. Anyway, at work. . . .

Counselor A pushes the emotion issue and is met with some resistance. The client changes the topic.

COUNSELOR B (in a somewhat lighthearted way): So she's still playing the mother role—to the hilt, it would seem.

CLIENT (with more of a bite in his voice): And the hilt includes not wanting me to grow up. But I am grown up . . . well, pretty grown up. But I don't always act grown up around her.

Counselor B, choosing to respond to the "strong mother" issue rather than the more sensitive "being kept a kid and feeling really lousy about it" issue, gives the client more room to move. This works, for the client himself moves toward the more sensitive issue: his playing the child, at least at times, when he's with his mother.

Some clients are hesitant to talk about certain emotions. One client might find it relatively easy to talk about his anger but not his hurt. The following client is talking about his disappointment at not being chosen for a special team at work:

CLIENT: I worked as hard as anyone else to get the project up and running. In fact, I was at the meeting where we came up with the idea in the first place. . . . And now they've dropped me.

COUNSELOR A: So you feel really hurt—left out of your own project.

CLIENT (hesitating): Hmm. . . . I'm really ticked off. Why shouldn't I be! . . .

Here is a client with lots of ego. He doesn't like the idea that he has been "hurt." Counselor B takes a different tact:

COUNSELOR B: So it's more than annoying to be left out of what, in many ways, is your own project.

CLIENT: How could they do that? . . . It's more than annoying. It's . . . well . . . humiliating!

Counselor B, factoring in the client's ego, sticks to the anger, allowing the client himself to name the more sensitive emotion. Contextual listening—in this case, listening to the client's emotions through the context of the pride he takes in himself and his accomplishments—is part of social intelligence. However, being sensitive to clients' sensitive emotions should not rob counseling of its robustness. Too much tiptoeing around clients' "sensitivities" does not serve them well. Remember what was said earlier: Clients are not as fragile as we sometimes make them out to be.

Use different ways to share highlights about feelings and emotions. Since clients express feelings in a number of different ways, helpers can communicate an understanding of feelings in a variety of ways.

- ***By single words:*** You feel good. You're depressed. You feel abandoned. You're delighted. You feel trapped. You're angry.
- ***By different kinds of phrases:*** You're sitting on top of the world. You feel down in the dumps. You feel left in the lurch. Your back's up against the wall. You're really steaming. You're really on a roll.
- ***By what is implied in behavioral statements:*** You feel like giving up (implied emotion: despair). You feel like hugging him (implied emotion: joy). Now that you see what he's done to you, you almost feel like throwing up (implied emotion: disgust).
- ***By what is implied in experiences that are revealed:*** You feel you're being dumped on (implied feeling: victimized). You feel you're being stereotyped (implied feeling: resentment). You feel you're at the top of her list (implied feeling: elation). You feel you're going to get caught (implied feeling: apprehension). Note that the implications of each can be spelled out: You feel angry because you're being dumped on. You resent the fact that you're being stereotyped. You feel great because it seems that you're at the top of her list.

Because ultimately you must discard formulas and use your own language—words that are yours rather than words from a textbook—it helps to have a variety of ways to communicate your understanding of clients' feelings and emotions. It keeps you from being wooden in your responses. Consider this example: The client tells you that she has just been given the kind of job she has been seeking for the past two years. Here are some possible responses to her emotion:

Single word: "You're really happy."

A phrase: "You're on cloud nine."

Experiential statement: "You feel you finally got what you deserve."

Behavioral statement: "You feel like going out and celebrating."

Obviously, your responses to clients should be yours, not canned responses from a textbook. With experience, you can extend your range of expression at the service of your clients. Providing variety will become second nature.

Neither overemphasize nor underemphasize feelings, emotions, and moods. Some counselors take an overly rational approach to helping and almost ignore clients' feelings. Others become too preoccupied with clients' emotions and moods. They pepper clients with questions about feelings and at times extort answers. To say that feelings, emotions, and moods are important is not to say that they are everything. The best defense against either extreme is to link feelings, emotions, and moods to the experiences and behaviors that give rise to them (see Anderson & Leitner, 1996).

Respond Accurately to the Key Experiences and Behaviors in Clients' Stories

Key experiences and behaviors give rise to clients' feelings, emotions, and moods. The "because" in the empathic highlight formula is to be followed by an indication of the experiences and behaviors that underlie the client's feelings. In the following example, the client, a graduate student in law school, is venting his frustration:

CLIENT (heatedly): You know why he got an A? He took my notes and disappeared. I didn't get a chance to study them. And I never even confronted him about it.

HELPER: You feel doubly angry because not only did he steal your notes, but you let him get away with it.

The response specifies both the client's experience (the theft) and his behavior (in this case, a failure to act) that give rise to his distress. His anger is directed at not only his classmate but also himself.

In the following example, a mugging victim has been talking to a counselor to help cope with his fears of going out. Before the mugging, he had given no thought to urban problems. Now he tends to see menace everywhere.

CLIENT: This gradual approach of getting back in the swing seems to be working. Last night I went out without a companion. First time. I have to admit that I was scared. But I think I've learned how to be careful. Last night was important. I feel I can begin to move around again.

HELPER: You feel comfortable with the one-step-at-a-time approach you've been taking. And it paid off last night when you bought back a big chunk of your freedom.

CLIENT: That's it! I know I'm going to be free again. . . . Here's what I've been thinking of doing. . . .

The client is talking about the success of the action phase of the program. The helper's response recognizes the client's satisfaction with the success of the program and how important it is for the client to feel both safe and free. The client moves on to describe the next phase of his program.

Another client, after a few sessions spread out over six months, tells her therapist about the progress she is making in rebuilding her life after a devastating car accident. She's back at work and has been working with her husband at rebuilding their marriage.

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—and it seems almost too good to be true.

CLIENT: Well, a "bubble bursting" might be the wrong image. I think there's a difference between being cautious and waiting for disaster to strike. I'll always be cautious, but I'm finding out that I can make things come true instead of sitting around waiting for them to happen as I usually do. I guess I've got to keep making my own luck.

The helper's highlight captures the flavor of the client's experiences, behaviors, and feelings. By encompassing both the client's enthusiasm and her lingering fears, the response is quite useful because the client makes an important distinction between reasonable caution and expecting the worst to happen. She moves on to her need to make things happen, to become more of an agent in her life.

As a beginner's tool for understanding how to share highlights, the stylized formula of "you feel . . . because . . ." has outlived its usefulness at this point and will be dropped in most of the examples that follow. It's too wooden. Experienced trainers use it only when it sounds natural. Otherwise, they use ordinary language to share highlights.

Respond with Highlights to Clients' Points of View, Decisions, and Proposals

By sharing highlights, you communicate to clients that you are working hard at understanding them to foster constructive change. This means not only understanding the key elements of the stories they tell but also the key elements of anything they share with you. Here are some examples that relate to clients' points of view, decisions, and proposals. It goes without saying that points of view, decisions, and proposals are, like stories, permeated to one degree or another with feelings and emotions.

Communicate understanding of clients' points of view. In the following example, the client, a 45-year-old man, is a construction worker, married, with four children between the ages of 9 and 16. He has been expressing concerns about his children.

CLIENT: I don't consider myself old-fashioned, but I think kids these days suffer from overindulgence. We keep giving them things. We let them do what they want. I fall into the same trap myself. It's just not good for them. I don't think we're preparing them for what the world is really like. People assume that the economy will keep booming. Everyone keeps shouting, "Free lunch!" This isn't doing kids any good.

COUNSELOR: So you see the "do what you want" and "free lunch" messages as a lot of hogwash. It's going to backfire, and your kids could end up getting hurt.

CLIENT: Right. . . . But I'm not in control. My kids can get one set of messages from me and then get a flood of contradictory messages outside and from TV and the Internet. I don't want to be a tyrant. Or come across as a killjoy. That doesn't work anyway. At work I see problems and I take care of them. But this has got me stymied.

COUNSELOR: So the whole picture seems pretty gloomy right now. You're not exactly sure what to do about it. And it's not exactly like the problems at work. You handle those routinely. What makes these problems so different?

Once the counselor communicates understanding of the client's point of view, the client moves on to share his sense of helplessness. The counselor realizes, however, that the client needs to check out the implications of his point of view. For instance, many parents do get their children to buy a more wholesome perspective on life than the media often present. And the client is probably not as helpless as he makes himself out to be.

Communicate understanding of clients' decisions. When clients announce key decisions or express their resolve to do something, it's important to recognize the core of what they are saying. In the following example, a client being treated for social phobia has benefitted greatly from cognitive-behavioral therapy. For instance, in uncomfortable social situations he has learned to block self-defeating thoughts and to keep his attention focused externally—on the social situation itself and on the agenda of the people involved—instead of turning in on himself. Here is a sample of this implementation or action-arrow dialogue:

CLIENT (emphatically): I'm not going to turn back. I've had to fight to get where I am now. But I can see how easy it could be to slide back into my old habits. I bet a lot of people do. I see it all around me. People make resolutions and then they peter out.

HELPER: Even though it's possible for you to give up your hard-earned gains, you're not going to do it. You're just not.

CLIENT: But what can I do to make sure that I won't? I'm convinced I won't, but . . .

HELPER: You need some rachets. They're the things that keep roller-coaster cars from sliding back. You hear them going click, click, click on the way up.

CLIENT: Ah, right! But I need psychological ones.

HELPER: And social ones. . . . What's kept you from sliding back so far?

In a positive-psychology mode, the counselor focuses on past successes. They go on to discuss the kind of "rachets" he needs to stay on track.

Communicate understanding of clients' intentions or proposals. In the next example, the client, who is hearing impaired, has been discussing ways of becoming, in her words, "a full-fledged member of my extended family." The discussion between client and helper takes place through a combination of lipreading and signing.

CLIENT (enthusiastically): Let me tell you what I'm thinking of doing. . . . First of all, I'm going to stop fading to the background in family and friends' conversation groups. I'll be the best listener there. And I'll get my thoughts across even if I have to use props. That's how I really am . . . inside, you know, in my mind.

HELPER: This sounds exciting. You're thinking of getting right into the middle of things, where you belong. You might even try a bit of drama.

CLIENT: And I think that, well, socially, I'm pretty smart. So I'm not talking about being melodramatic or anything. I can do all this with finesse, not just barge in.

HELPER: So the you they'll see will be socially savvy. You'll make it all natural. Draw me a couple of pictures of what this would look like.

The client comes up with a proposal for a course of action that will help her take her "rightful place" in conversations with family and friends setting her agenda (Stage III). The helper's responses recognize her enthusiasm and sense of determination. They go on to have a dialogue about practical tactics. And providing some examples helps the client identify the implications of her proposal.

Principles for Sharing Highlights

Here are a number of principles that can guide you as you share highlights. Remember that these guidelines are principles, not formulas to be followed slavishly.

Use empathic highlights at every stage and step of the helping process. Sharing highlights is useful at every stage and every step of the helping process. Communicating and checking understanding is always helpful. Here are some examples of helpers sharing highlights at different stages and steps of the helping process.

Stage I: Problem clarification and opportunity identification. A teenager in his third year of high school has just found out that he is moving with his family to a different city. A school counselor responds, "You're miserable because you have to leave all your friends. But it sounds like you may even feel a bit betrayed. You didn't see this coming at all." The counselor realizes that he has to help his client pick up the pieces and move on, but sharing his understanding helps build a foundation to do so. The teen goes on to talk in positive terms about the large city they will be moving to and the opportunities it will offer. At one point, the school counselor responds, "So there's an upside to all this. Big cities are filled with things to do. You like theater and there's loads there. That's something to look forward to."

Stage II: Evaluating goal options. A woman has been discussing the trade-offs between marriage and career. At one point, her helper says, "There's some ambivalence here. If you marry Jim, you might not be able to have the kind of career you'd like. Or did I hear you half say that it might be possible to put both together? Sort of get the best of both worlds." The client goes on the explore the possibilities around "getting the best of both worlds." It helps her greatly in preparing for her next conversation with Jim.

Stage III: Choosing actions to accomplish goals. A man has been discussing his desire to control his cholesterol level without taking a medicine with side effects that worry him. He says that this drug-free approach might work. The

counselor responds, "It's a relief to know that sticking to the diet and exercise might mean that you won't have to take any medicine. Hmm . . . let's explore the 'might' part. I'm not exactly sure what your doctor said." The helper recognizes an important part of the client's message but then seeks further clarification.

The action arrow: implementation issues. A married couple have been struggling to put into practice a few strategies to improve their communication with each other. They've both called their attempt a "disaster." The counselor replies, "OK, so you're annoyed with yourselves for not accomplishing even the simple active-listening goals you set for yourselves. . . . Let's see what we can learn from the 'disaster'" (said somewhat lightheartedly). The counselor communicates understanding of their disappointment in not implementing their plan, but, in the spirit of positive psychology, focuses on what they can learn from the failure.

Communicating understanding by sharing empathic highlights is a mode of human contact, a relationship builder, a conversational lubricant, a perception-checking intervention, and a mild form of social influence. It is always useful. Driscoll (1984), in his commonsense way, refers to highlights as "nickel-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). Since sharing highlights provides a continual trickle of understanding, it is a way of providing support for clients throughout the helping process. It is never wrong to let clients know that you are trying to understand them from their frame of reference. Of course, thoughtful listening and processing lead to highlights that are much more than "nickel-and-dime interventions." Clients who feel they are being understood participate more effectively and more fully in the helping process. Since sharing highlights helps build trust, it paves the way for stronger interventions on the part of the helper, such as challenging.

Respond selectively to clients' core messages. It is impossible to respond with highlights to everything a client says. Therefore, as you listen to clients, try to identify and respond to what you believe are core messages—that is, the heart of what the client is saying and expressing—especially if the client speaks at any length. Sometimes this selectivity means paying particular attention to one or two messages even though the client communicates many. For instance, a young woman, in discussing her doubts about marrying her companion, says at one time or another during a session that she is tired of his sloppy habits, is not really interested in his friends, wonders about his lack of intellectual curiosity, is dismayed at his relatively low level of career aspirations, and vehemently resents the fact that he faults her for being highly ambitious. Throughout one session, the counselor follows the client's lead, sharing a steady stream of empathic highlights to help the client herself identify what is core. His summary highlight at the end allows her to question the direction in which she and her friend are headed:

COUNSELOR: The whole picture doesn't look very promising, but the mismatch in career expectations is especially troubling.

CLIENT: You know, I'm beginning to think that Jim and I would be pretty good friends, even *because* we're so different. But partners? Maybe that's pushing it.

Of course, since clients are not always so obliging, helpers must continually ask themselves as they listen, "What is key? What is most important here?" and then find ways of checking it out with clients. This helps clients sort out things that are not clear in their own minds.

Responding selectively sometimes means focusing on experiences or actions or feelings rather than all three. Consider the following example of a client who is experiencing stress because of his wife's poor health and 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.

HELPER: It's been a lousy, overwhelming 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 forget it all. . . . Almost run away. . . . But I can't. . . . I mean I won't.

The counselor chooses to emphasize the feelings of the client, because she believes that his feelings of frustration and irritation are uppermost in his consciousness right now. This helps him move deeper into the problem situation—and then find a bit of resolve at the bottom of the pit.

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.

HELPER: The inconsistency is killing you.

CLIENT: Absolutely! 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. Sometimes I come late to avoid all this. But that makes him even madder.

In this response, the counselor emphasizes the client's experience of her father's inconsistency. It hits the mark and she explores the problem situation further.

Respond to the context, not just the words. A good empathic response is not based solely on the client's immediate words and nonverbal behavior. It also takes into account the context of what is said, everything that "surrounds" and permeates a client's statement. This client may be in crisis. That client may be doing a more leisurely "taking stock" of life. You are listening to clients in the context of their lives. The context modifies everything the client says.

Consider this case. 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 light of Jeff's upbringing and environment. The context includes the racist attitudes of many people in his blue-collar neighborhood, the sporadic violence

there, Jeff's gang membership, 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.

HELPER: Looking back, 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: More than bitter! I've screwed up the rest of my life. It's not like I got up that morning saying that I was going to bash someone that day.

The counselor's response is in no way an attempt to excuse Jeff's behavior, but it does factor in some of the environmental realities. Later on he will challenge Jeff to decide whether his environment—prejudices, gang membership, family history—is to own him or whether, to the degree that this is possible, he is to own his environment.

Use highlights as a mild social-influence process. Because helpers cannot respond with highlights to everything their clients say, they are always searching for core messages. They are forced into a selection process that influences the course of the therapeutic dialogue. So even sharing highlights can be part of the social-influence process outlined in Chapter 3. Helpers believe that the messages they select for attention are core primarily because they are core for the client. But helpers also believe, at some level, that certain messages should be important for the client. In the following example, an incest victim turned incest perpetrator is in jail awaiting trial. In a session with a counselor, he is trying to exonerate himself by blaming what happened to him in the past. He has been talking so quickly that the helper finds it difficult to interrupt. Finally, the helper, who has a pretty good working relationship with the client, breaks in.

HELPER: You've used some strong language to describe yourself. Let me see if I have some of them right. You said something about being "structurally deformed." I believe you also used the term "automatic reactions." You describe yourself as "haunted" and "driven."

CLIENT: Well . . . I guess it's strong language. . . . Makes me sound like a psychological freak. Which I'm not.

The helper wants the client to listen to himself. So his "let me get this straight" response is a kind of empathic highlight form of challenge. It hits the mark because the client pulls himself up short. Of course, helpers need to be careful not to put words in clients' mouths.

Use highlights to stimulate movement in the helping process. Sharing highlights is an excellent tool for building the helping relationship. But it also needs to serve the goals of the helping process. Therefore, sharing highlights is useful to the degree that it helps the client move forward. What does "move forward" mean? That depends on the stage or step in focus. For instance, sharing highlights helps clients move forward in Stage I if it helps them explore a problem situation or an undeveloped opportunity more realistically. It helps clients move forward in Stage II to the degree that it helps them identify and explore possibilities for a better future, craft a change agenda, or discuss commitment to that agenda. Moving forward in Stage III means clarifying action strategies, choosing specific things to do, and setting up a plan. In the action phase, moving forward means identifying obstacles to action, overcoming them, and accomplishing goals.

In the following example, a somewhat stressed trainee in a counseling program is talking to his supervisor:

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 sharing highlights faster than I am. I'm still afraid of responding directly to others. I think I should reevaluate my participation in the program.

TRAINER: So you catch yourself saying to yourself things like, "She's better than I am at this" and "He's picking this stuff up faster than I am." And this adds up to, "Maybe I shouldn't be here at all." Is it something like that?

TRAINEE: Well, yes, but . . . I know that my tendency to get down on myself and give up is part of the problem, part of my style. I'm not the brightest, but I'm certainly not dumb either. My communication skills are a lot better than when I first arrived. And I'm using them more in everyday life. . . ."

When the trainer "hits the mark," it jolts the trainee into focusing on his strengths rather than his weaknesses.

In the next example, a young woman visits the student services center at her college to discuss an unwanted pregnancy:

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. Now people are trying to push me toward abortion.

HELPER: You're still so amazed that it's almost impossible to accept that it's true. To make things worse, people are telling you what to do.

CLIENT: Amazed? I'm stupefied! Mainly, at my own stupidity for getting myself into this. I've never had such an expensive lesson in my life. But I've decided one thing. No one, no one is going to tell me what to do now. I'll make my own decisions.

After the helper's highlight, self-recrimination over her lack of self-responsibility helps the client make a stand. She says she wants to capitalize on a very expensive mistake. It often happens that sharing highlights that hit the mark puts pressure on clients to move forward. So sharing highlights, even though it is a communication of understanding, is also part of the social-influence process.

Recover from inaccurate understanding. Although helpers should strive to be accurate in the understanding they communicate, all helpers can be inaccurate at times. 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. Therefore, sharing highlights is a perception-checking tool. If the helper's response is accurate, the client often tends to confirm its accuracy in two ways. The first is some kind of verbal or nonverbal indication that the helper is right. That is, the client nods or gives some other nonverbal cue, or uses some assenting word or phrase such as "that's right" or "exactly." This happens in the following example, in which a client who has been arrested for selling drugs is talking to his probation officer.

HELPER: So your neighborhood makes it easy to do things that can get you into 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.

The second and more substantive way in which clients acknowledge the accuracy of the helper's response is by moving forward in the helping process—for instance, by clarifying the problem situation or preferred-scenario possibilities more fully. In the preceding example, the client not only acknowledges the accuracy of the helper's empathy verbally—"You bet it does"—but, more importantly, also outlines the problem situation in greater detail. By again responding with a shared highlight, the helper leads the client to the next cycle: further clarification of the problem or opportunity, or moving on to goal setting or some kind of problem-managing action.

On the other hand, when a response is inaccurate, the client often lets the counselor know in different ways. He or she may stop dead, fumble around, go off on a different tangent, tell the counselor, "That's not exactly what I meant," or even try to get the helper back on track. Helpers need to be sensitive to all these cues. In the following example, Ben, a man who lost his wife and daughter in a train crash, has been talking about the changes that have taken place since the accident:

HELPER: 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 anymore.

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 for me just to phone others to get together. It takes so much energy sometimes being with others that I just don't try.

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

BEN: I'm in low gear, grinding away. And I don't know how to get out of it.

Ben says that it is not a question of motivation but of energy. The difference is important to him. By picking up on it, the helper gets the interview back on track. Ben wants to regain his old energy, but he doesn't know how. His "lack of energy" is most likely some form of depression, and there are a number of ways to help clients deal with depression. This provides an opening for moving the helping process forward.

If you are intent on understanding your clients, they will not be put off by occasional inaccuracies on your part. Figure 6-1 indicates two different paths: one when helpers hit the mark in sharing highlights the first time, the other when they are inaccurate and then recover.

Use empathic highlights to bridge diversity gaps. This principle is a corollary of the preceding two. Highlights based on effective tuning in and listening constitute one of the most important tools you have in interacting with clients who differ from you in significant ways. Sharing highlights is one way of telling clients that you are a learner, especially if the client differs from you in significant ways. Scott and Borodovsky (1990) refer to empathic listening as "cultural role taking." They could say "diversity role taking." In the following example, a young white male

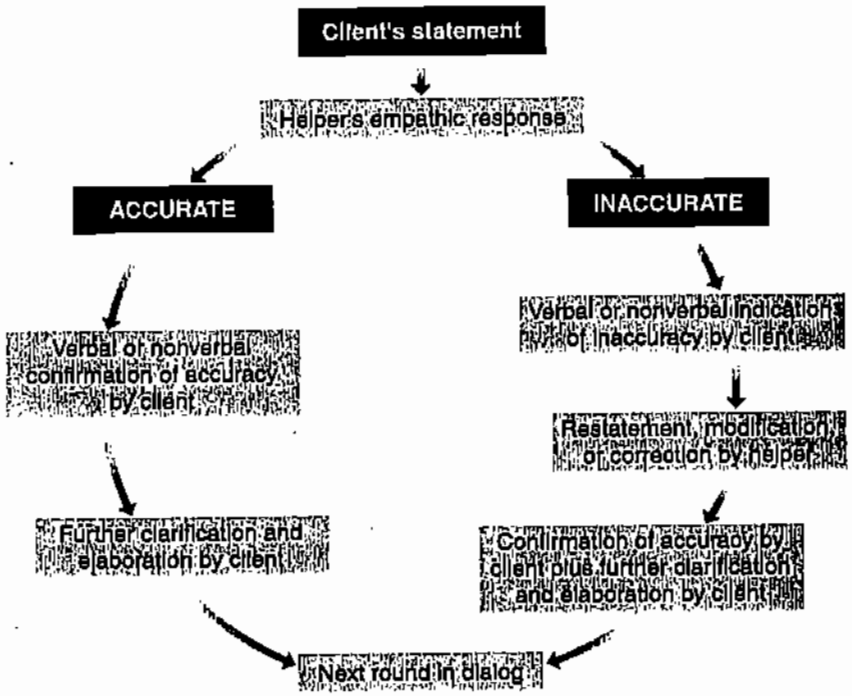

FIGURE 6-1
The Movement Caused by Accurate and Inaccurate Highlights

counselor is talking with an elderly African American woman who has recently lost her husband. She is in the hospital with a broken leg.

CLIENT: I hear they try to get you out of these places as quick as possible. But I seem to be lying around here doing nothing. Jimmy [her late husband] wouldn't even recognize me.

HELPER: It's pretty depressing to have this happen so close to losing your husband.

CLIENT: Oh, I'm not depressed. I just want to get out of here and get back to doing things at home. Jimmy's gone, but there's plenty of people around there to help me take care of myself.

HELPER: Getting back into the swing of things is the best medicine for you.

CLIENT: Now you got it right. What I need right now is to know when I can go home and what I need to do for my leg once I get there. I've got to get things in order. That's what I do best.

The helper makes assumptions that might be true for him and his culture, but they miss the mark with the client. She's taking her problems in stride and counting on her social system and a return to everyday household life to keep her going. The helper's second response hits the mark and she, in Stage II fashion, outlines some of things she wants.

Tactics for Communicating Highlights

The principles just outlined provide strategies for sharing empathic highlights. Here are a few hints—tactics, if you will—to help you improve the quality of your responses:

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 to identify the core message being communicated. Watch some experts on tape. They often 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 can be relatively frequent but should be lean and trim. In trying to be accurate, the beginner is often long-winded, especially if he or she waits too long to respond. 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 responses to the client, but remain yourself. If a client speaks animatedly, telling you how he finally got his partner to listen to his point of view about a new venture, and you reply accurately but in a flat, dull voice, your response is not fully empathic. This does not mean that you should mimic your clients, go overboard, or not be yourself. It means that part of being with the client is sharing in a reasonable way in his or her emotional tone. Consider this example:

TWELVE-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: This is a bit perplexing. You wonder why she singles you out for so much discipline.

Counselor A's language is stilted, not in tune with the way a 12-year-old speaks. Here's a different approach.

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

On the other hand, helpers should not adopt a language that is not their own just to be on the client's wavelength. An older counselor using "hip" language or slang with a young client sounds ludicrous.

A Caution: The Importance of Empathic Relationships

In day-to-day conversations, sharing empathic highlights is a tool of civility. Making an effort to get in touch with your conversational partner's frame of reference sends a message of respect. Therefore, sharing highlights plays an important part in building relationships. However, the communication skills as practiced in helping settings don't automatically transfer to the ordinary social settings of everyday life.

In everyday life, understanding does not necessarily have to be put into words. Given enough time, people establish empathic relationships with one another in which understanding is communicated in a variety of rich and subtle ways without necessarily 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 struggles going on inside you. But I also know that you'd like me to rescue you, as soon as 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 expresses both empathy and support. I was in the home of a poor 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.

On the other hand, some people enter caringly into the world of their relatives, friends, and colleagues and are certainly "with" them but don't know how to communicate understanding through words. When a wife complains, "I don't know whether he really understands," she is not necessarily saying that her relationship with her husband is not mutually empathic. She is more likely saying that she would appreciate it if he were to put his understanding into words more often. In general, it is highly desirable to use empathic highlights more frequently in everyday life, especially when relationships are not going as well as they might. Sharing highlights plays an important role in developing empathic relationships. Box 6-1 summarizes the main points about the use of empathy as a communication skill.

The Shadow Side of Sharing Empathic Highlights

Some helpers are poor communicators without even realizing it. Many responses that novice or inept helpers make are really poor substitutes for sharing accurate empathic highlights. Here is an example that illustrates a range of such responses. Robin is a young woman who has just started a career in law. This is her second visit to a counselor in private practice. In the first session, she said she wanted to "talk through" some issues relating to the "transition" from school to business life. She appeared quite self-confident. In this session, after talking about a number of transition issues, she begins speaking in a rather strained voice and avoids eye contact with the counselor.

ROBIN: Something else is bothering me a bit. . . . Maybe it shouldn't. After all, I've got the kind of career that a lot of women would die for. Well—I'm glad that none of my feminist colleagues is around—I don't like the way I look. I'm neither fat nor thin, but I don't really like the shape of my body. And I'm uncomfortable with some of my facial features. Maybe this is a strange time of life to start thinking about this. In two years, I'll be 30. . . . I bet I seem like an affluent, self-centered yuppie.

Robin pauses and looks at a piece of art on the wall. What would you do or say? Here are some possibilities that are better avoided.

Box 6-1 Suggestions for Sharing Empathic Highlights

1. Remember that empathy is a value, a way of being, that should permeate all communication skills.
2. Tune in carefully, both physically and psychologically, and listen actively to the client's point of view.
3. Make every effort to set your judgments and biases aside for the moment and walk in the client's shoes.
4. As the client speaks, listen especially for core messages.
5. Listen to both verbal and nonverbal messages and their context.
6. Respond with highlights 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 highlights to keep the client focused on important issues.
9. Move gradually toward the exploration of sensitive topics and feelings.
10. After sharing a highlight, attend carefully to cues that either confirm or deny the accuracy of your response.
11. Determine whether your highlights are helping the client remain focused and are stimulating the clarification of key 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 in your responses.
13. Keep in mind that the communication skill of sharing empathic highlights, however important, is just one tool to help clients see themselves and their problem situations more clearly with a view to managing them more effectively.

No response. It can be a mistake to say nothing, though cultures differ widely in how they deal with silence (Sue, 1990). In North American culture, generally speaking, 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. Don't leave Robin sitting there stewing in her own juices. A skilled helper would realize that a person's nonacceptance of his or her body could generalize to other aspects of life (Dworkin & Kerr, 1987; Worsley, 1981) and therefore should not be treated as just a "vanity" problem.

Distracting questions. Some helpers, like many people in everyday life, cannot stop themselves from asking questions. Instead of responding with an empathic highlight, a counselor might ask something like, "Is this something new now that you've started working?" This response ignores what Robin has said and the feelings she has expressed and focuses rather on the helper's mistaken agenda to get more information. More about this in Chapter 7.

Clichés. A counselor might say, "The workplace is competitive. It's not uncommon for issues like this to come up." This is cliché talk. It turns the helper into an insensitive instructor and probably sounds dismissive to the client. Clichés are hollow. The helper is saying, in effect, "You don't really have a problem at all, at least not a serious one." Clichés are a very poor substitute for understanding.

Interpretations. For some helpers, interpretive responses based on their theories of helping seem more important than expressing understanding. Such a counselor might say something like this: "Robin, my bet is that your body-image concerns are probably just a symptom. I've got a hunch that you're not really accepting yourself. That's the real problem." 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. In everyday life, giving unsolicited advice is extremely common. It happens in counseling, too. For instance, a counselor might say to Robin, "Hey, don't let this worry you. You'll be so involved with work issues that these concerns will disappear." Advice giving at this stage is out of order and, to make things worse, the advice given has a cliché flavor to it. Furthermore, giving advice robs clients of self-responsibility.

Parroting. Sharing a highlight does not mean merely repeating what the client has said. Such parroting is a parody of sharing empathic highlights. Review what Robin said about herself at the beginning of this section. Then evaluate the following "empathic" response.

> COUNSELOR: So Robin, even though you have a great job, one that many people would envy, it's your feelings about your body that bother you. The feminist in you recoils a bit from this news. But there are things you don't like—your body shape, some facial features. You're wondering why this is hitting you now. You also seem to be ashamed of these thoughts. "Maybe I'm just self-centered" is what you're saying to yourself.

Most of this is accurate, but it sounds awful. Mere repetition, or restatement, or paraphrasing carries no sense of real understanding of, no sense of being with, the client. Real understanding, because it passes through you, should convey some part of you. Parroting doesn't. To avoid parroting, tap into the processing you've been doing as you listened, come at what the client has said from a slightly different angle, use your own words, change the order, refer to an expressed but unnamed emotion—in a word, do whatever you can to let the client know that you are working at understanding.

Sympathy and agreement. Being empathic is not the same as agreeing with the client or being sympathetic. An expression of sympathy has much more in common with pity, compassion, commiseration, and condolence than with empathic understanding. Although these are fully human traits, they are not particularly useful in counseling. Sympathy denotes agreement, whereas empathy denotes understanding

and acceptance of the person of the client. At its worst, sympathy is a form of collusion with the client. Note the difference between Counselor A's response to Robin and Counselor B's response.

COUNSELOR A: This is not an easy thing to struggle with. It's even harder to talk about. It's even worse for someone who is as self-confident as you usually are.

ROBIN: I guess so.

Note that Robin does not respond very enthusiastically to collusion talk. She is interested in managing her problem. The helping process does not move forward. Let's see a different approach.

COUNSELOR B: You've got some misgivings about how you look, yet you wonder whether you're even justified talking about it.

ROBIN: I know. It's like I'm ashamed of my being ashamed. What's worse, I get so preoccupied with my body that I stop thinking of myself as a person. It blinds me to the fact that I more or less like the person I am.

Counselor B's response gives Robin the opportunity to deal with her immediate anxiety and then to explore her problem situation more fully.

Faking it. Clients are sometimes confused, distracted, and in a highly emotional state. All these conditions affect the clarity of what they are saying about themselves. Helpers may fail to pick up what clients are saying because of the clients' confusion or because clients are not stating their messages clearly. Or the helpers themselves may have become distracted in one way or another. In any case, it's a mistake to feign understanding. Genuine helpers 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's 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," "um," and "I understand." On the other hand, if you often catch yourself saying that you don't understand, you'd better find out what's going on. Faking it is never a substitute for competence.

CHAPTER

7

THE ART OF PROBING AND SUMMARIZING