

## Empathic Listening, Carl Rogers

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(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dLsgpHw5x0>)

**00:03** [A Calming flute begins playing with the opening credits.]

**00:11 CARL ROGERS:** [Flute continues.] Many years ago, I realized how powerful it was to listen to a person. And, in recent months I've been working on a paper – trying to take a fresh look at the – at the power of listening. At the power of – of an empathic way of being. And... that's what I wanted to talk to you about.

**00:41** [Flute Ends as Rogers begins his speech.] We should re-examine and re-evaluate that very special way of being with another person, which we call empathic. I believe we tend to give too little importance and consideration to an element which is extremely important in the understanding of personality dynamics, and for effecting changes in personality and in behavior. I think it's one of the most delicate and potent tools that we have, and I am impressed at how rarely we see it in real life situations in any full-fledged form.

**01:22** Um, I- I guess I'll start with my somewhat, uh, faltering history in relation to this, uh, to this topic. Very early in my work as a therapist I discovered that simply listening to my client very attentively was an important way of being helpful. So, when I was in doubt as to what I should do in some active way, I simply listened, and it seemed surprising to me that such a passive kind of interaction could be so useful.

**01:57** And, a little later, a social worker whom I hired, who'd had a background of Rankian Training, was really, um, most helpful to me. She helped me to learn that the most effective response, the most effective listening, was where you listen for the feelings and emotions that were behind the words. That were, um, just a little bit concealed, and, um, where you could discern a pattern of feeling behind what was being said. And I think she's the one who, um, first suggested that, uh, the best response was to reflect these feelings to the client. And reflect is a word that later made me cringe, but at the time it really was very helpful to me in my, uh, in my work as a therapist, and I was – I was very grateful to her. I felt I learned a great deal from her, she learned very little from me. [Student Laughter.]

**02:56** Um, then came my transition to a fulltime university position, where, with the help of students, I was finally able to scrounge the equipment for recording our interviews – a dream I'd had for a number of years. And, I just can't exaggerate the excitement of our learnings as we clustered about the machine which enabled us to listen to ourselves playing over and over again some puzzling point in the interview, uh, at which something clearly went wrong. Or, focusing on those moments in which there seemed to be, um, a response that helped, or a significant forward movement in the interview. I guess I – I still regard, uh, listening to one's recorded interviews as perhaps the very best mode of improving oneself as a – as a helping person.

**03:55** Um, among many lessons from listening to these recordings, we came to realize that listening to feelings, and reflecting them, was a complex – a vastly complex – experience. Um, we discovered that we could pinpoint a therapist’s response where, uh, significant forward movement occurred. We could, uh, where – where perhaps the client was talking in a, um, vague and desultory fashion, and one therapist’s response would enable him to really begin to move. And you could also pinpoint the responses where a nice forward-moving process was brought to a dead stop by one, uh, one particular response.

**04:49** So, in such a context of learning, it became quite natural that, uh, we focused upon the content of the therapist’s response rather than upon the empathic quality of the listening. And no longer particularly apologize for that – it was probably a necessary step in our – in our learning. To this extent we became very much conscious of the techniques that the counselor or therapist was using. We became really expert in analyzing in minute detail. I can remember sitting around with students and – and picking apart sentences, and particular phrases and words, um, and we profited a great deal from that very microscopic study of the – of the interview process. I think we gained a great deal from it.

**05:46** Um, but this tendency to focus on the therapist’s responses had consequences which appalled me. Uh, I was meeting considerable hostility as to my point of view, and that – that really didn’t seem to bother me. But, uh, but this kind of thing did bother me: because the whole approach came in a few years to be known as a “technique”. Uh, “Nondirective Therapy”, as it said, is the technique of reflecting the client’s feelings. Period. So then you’ve taken care of Nondirective Therapy. Or even worse, uh, an even worse caricature was simply that, uh, in Nondirective Therapy you just say the last – say back the last words that the client said. And, really I was so shocked and appalled by that, uh, complete distortion of our approach that for a number of years I almost said nothing about, uh, Empathic, uh, Listening. And when I did it was to stress an empathic attitude with very little comment as to how that attitude might be implemented in the relationship. I just became frightened of the, uh, of the distortion. I preferred to discuss the qualities of Positive Regard, and Therapist Congruence, which I’d come to hypothesize as being two other, uh, conditions that, uh, were growth-promoting in a – in a relationship. And, those concepts were often misunderstood too, but, uh, they never became to be caricatured in the same way that the, uh, that the empathic listening was – was caricatured.

**07:31** Over the years, however, the – the research evidence keeps piling up, and it points strongly to the conclusion that a high-degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly [Emphasis.] the most potent factor, and certainly one of the most potent factors, in bringing about change and learning. And so I believe it’s time for me to forget the caricatures and misrepresentations of the past and take a fresh look of empathy.

**08:00** For still another reason, it seems timely to do this. In the United States during the past decade, many new approaches to therapy have held center-stage: Gestalt Therapy, Psychodrama, Primal Therapy, Bioenergetics, Rational Emotive Therapy, Transactional Analysis – are some of the best known, but there are more. And part of their appeal seems to me to lie on the fact that, in most instances, the therapist is clearly the expert, actively manipulating the situation, often in dramatic ways, for the client’s benefit. But if I read the signs correctly, I believe there is some decrease in the fascination with such expertise in guiding people.

**08:51** With another approach that is based on expertise, however, behavior therapy, I think there's no doubt that the fascination with that approach is – is on the [Emphasis.] increase, uh, and I think I can really understand that. I think a technological society has been delighted to find a technology by which man's behavior can be shaped even without his knowledge or approval. Toward goals that, uh, the therapist chooses, or that has - have been chosen by – by a society.

**09:24** And yet, even here, much questioning by thoughtful individuals is springing up as the philosophical and the political implications of, uh, such an approach become more clearly visible. So I have seen a willingness on the part of many to take another look at ways of being with people which evoke self-directed change, and locate power in the person, not in the therapist. And this brings me, again, to examine carefully what we mean by empathy, and what we've come to know about it.

**10:02** To formulate a current description, I would want to draw on the concept of experiencing as – as formulated by Gene Gendlin. Briefly, it's his view that at all times there is going on in the human organism a flow of experiencing's, um, to which the individual can turn to again and again as a referent in order to discover the meaning of what he is experiencing. He sees empathy as pointing sensitively to the felt meaning which the client is experiencing in this particular moment. In order to help him focus on that, uh, meaning, and to carry it further to it's full and uninhibited experiencing. An example may make more clear both the concept and its relation to empathy.

**10:55** A man in an encounter group is, uh, making some vaguely negative statements about his father, and the, uh, facilitator says:

[Rogers Speaking as the Facilitator.] "It sounds though you might be angry at your father."

[Rogers Speaking as the Man.] "No...I don't think so."

[Rogers Speaking as the Facilitator.] "Dissatisfied with him?"

[Rogers Speaking as the Man.] "Hm...Perhaps..."

[Rogers Speaking as the Facilitator.] "Disappointed in him?"

[Rogers Speaking as the Man.] "Yeah, yeah that's it. I – I am disappointed in him. I've been disappointed ever since I was a child because he is not a strong person."

**11:29** And I think that kind of example, uh well, [Thinking.] uh, does – does illuminate Gendlin's concept, uh, in this way. Against what is the man checking these various terms? [Emphasized] Angry. No... that isn't it. [Emphasis] Dissatisfied. Well that's closer... Disappointed? [Clarity] Ah... That matches the flow of I think visceral experiencing that's going on within, and the person has a very sure knowledge of – of that flow, and can really tell when you're speaking to it. In other words, the right word taps the – the, uh, right label or the right phrase, often taps the – the exact meaning of the flow that is going on within him that he hasn't been able to, uh, label or – or understand himself. It enables him to bring into awareness the – the real meaning of – of what's going on within.

**12:29** So, um, with that conceptual background, I'd like to attempt a description of empathy that should seem satisfactory to me today. I would no longer be terming it a state of empathy, which was in my earlier definition, because I believe it to be a process rather than a state, and – and perhaps I can capture that quality.

**12:51** The way of being with another person, which is termed “Empathic”, has several facets: it means entering the private, perceptual world of the other, and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves having sensitive – being sensitive moment to moment to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person. To the fear, or rage, or tenderness, or confusion, or whatever, that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his life, moving about in it delicately, without making judgements, sensing meanings of which he is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover feelings of which he is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening. It includes communicating your sensing’s of his world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which he is fearful. It means frequently checking with him as to the accuracy of your sensing’s and being guided by his responses. You are a confident companion to him in his world. By pointing to the possible meanings of the flow of his or her experiencing, you help him to focus on this useful type of referent to experience his meanings more fully and to move forward in his or her experiencing.

**14:22** [Recording Ends]