

Your own mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a person-centred approach (3)

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Carl Rogers
- ▶ Core conditions
- ▶ COVID-19
- ▶ Empathy
- ▶ Mental health
- ▶ Person-centred approach
- ▶ Self-awareness

In my last two articles (Molyneux, 2021a; 2021b), I introduced the person-centred approach before looking at more detail at the idea of Acceptance (sometimes referred to as Unconditional Positive Regard) in relating to COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, I will be taking a closer look at the place of Empathy in our lives and more importantly, how it can inform our approach to both ourselves and others during the current pandemic.

Empathy is defined as “the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.” (dictionary.com). It is a term that has become more widely used and encouraged in our relating to others. It can be simple in its definition, but much harder in its attitude or offering, especially with those that we don’t agree with or struggle to connect or align with.

Within the person-centred approach, Empathy is seen as an essential attitude that we offer to our clients and forms one of the three core conditions (explored in previous articles). Carl Rogers (the founder of the person-centred approach) describes Empathy as the ability to “sense the client’s private world as if it were your own... The therapist is well able to understand the patients’ feelings [and] The therapist’s remarks fit in just right with the patient’s mood and content.” (Rogers, 1957) If we break down this description from Rogers, I believe we can begin to see the many different and essential features within offering empathy, as well as the nuance and layers, of not only holding this attitude, but also communicating it to others.

Firstly, I believe that in order to be empathic to another’s experience, we have to begin with the attitude and intention of truly hearing another person. Maybe the easiest way to point out this attitude is to distinguish between listening and hearing. Listening, I believe, is to simply listen to another, without interruption (ideally!) and for the words to register on at least some level. To

hear, however, I believe, is a much more defined and generous attitude. It involves truly listening to another, and not just to their words, but also their experience, their emotion, even the meaning in these words for the other person. On top of this, I believe that to be empathic, is to put aside our own judgements and beliefs and to listen to the meaning of these words for the other person. After all, it is their experience and not ours!

The second half of Rogers quote speaks of being able to communicate this empathic understanding to the other person. It is not enough, to simply believe that we understand what another person is saying, but actually checking this out with them. First, to ensure that our understanding is correct (after all they are the only person that confirm this!) and second, in checking out this understanding (and hopefully being accurate) the other person can begin to trust that we really do understand their experience and feel deeply understood. Additionally, through checking our understanding, it also gives room to correct our empathy if we have not quite understood or need to adjust our understanding to be closer to the others experience.

An example of an empathic exchanged may look something like this:

Person 1 – “I have just really struggled through this pandemic. It has really made me question what is important to me in life, how fragile and unpredictable it can be, and also how easily I can take things for granted”

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Person 2 – “Almost as if it has really made you take stock of life and your place in it? That things can change so quickly and drastically, and that you were maybe taking things for granted and expecting them to continue to be the same, is that it?”

Person 1 – “Yes, exactly that. I feel like I have really had my eyes opened and been forced to recognise how easily things can change and how much I had been expecting them to stay the same”

Another thing that we will often find in being empathic to another’s experience is that it allows them, maybe even encourages them, to share more with us and begin to peel back the layers of their experience. I imagine that we can all think of times when we might have felt like someone really does understand us and how we then may be more inclined to share more of ourselves or expand on what we are sharing. Conversely, if we feel like someone is not really listening to us, understanding, or even attempting to understand, then we may be more inclined to share less or close down our communication with them.

So, now that there is hopefully some further understanding of what empathy might look or feel like, we can begin to look at how we might begin to allow this to inform our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and peoples experience within this.

EMPATHY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While I believe that Empathy is an attitude that transforms relationships and people, maybe it is needed more than ever throughout a pandemic where people have felt isolated, disconnected and pained. As Brene Brown often says, “Empathy breeds connection” and I feel that we are at a time where connection is maybe more important than ever. So how can we try to encourage this attitude to be more present in our day to day lives and exchanges with those around us?

As mentioned above, I believe this all starts with the attitude of wanting to hear and understand another’s experience. This does

not mean that we are under some obligation to constantly be offering this to those we converse with, but I believe that there is huge benefit from taking this attitude into our interactions with others when we feel able.

Being a therapist, it can often be the case that this attitude is assumed or desired from those that I interact with and it is important, for me, that I am congruent (genuine) in my offering of this attitude when I do relate to others in this way. It is absolutely acceptable and expected that there are times when we feel that we don’t have the capacity or inclination to offer empathy to others, and for myself, I know how important it is to allow myself this decision if it feels necessary (see Unconditional Positive Self-regard – Molyneux 2021, b)

While it may seem strange to begin a section on offering empathy with allowing ourselves to not offer empathy, I believe that giving ourselves this freedom of choice, increases the chances of offering empathy congruently when we do feel able or inclined. In an ideal world, we would offer this to every person we interact with, but sometimes that may just not be possible. We may be rushing to get somewhere, not in the right headspace to listen to others or just lacking capacity, which I feel has never been so relevant than during a trying pandemic.

However, what I feel is a huge benefit in this attitude is that it also allows us the choice and capacity to offer empathy to those when we do feel able or inclined. By looking after ourselves and our needs, it means that we will have more to offer to others when it may be needed or we feel a desire to offer this attitude congruently to another.

THE CHALLENGES OF EMPATHY”

One of the biggest challenges of offering empathy to another is the struggle that we can sometimes find in putting our own views and judgements aside, in order to hear another person’s experience fully. In the lead up to the pandemic, and during, I believe that we have often seen signs of a world that can be quite divisive and polarised (e.g. politics, referendums, views on vaccinations or masks) and this can provide the biggest challenge (and

opportunity) to truly understand and connect with others.

It may seem quite straightforward or easy to begin to understand another's experience if it is similar to our own or we agree with it, but how might it be to try and understand another's experience if we don't agree with it or believe that they should feel differently? This can sometimes be one of the biggest challenges as a therapist and also in general day-to-day interactions. We can so often become clouded or triggered by another's experience if it does not match our own or we conclude that it doesn't feel valid or logical. However, there is an important factor to consider in this that can ease this tension and disconnection with others.

The beauty of empathy, is that in order to understand another person, we are stepping into their world and so that means that we don't need to convince them of our view or see things from our perspective (although we may often try!) Although we may, there is no need to feel threatened by or need to do anything to, another's experience. We simply need to try and hear, and understand, how something is for that person, in their world, without it doing anything to our own world.

It is almost like stepping into another person house. Yes, we may have some views about their wallpaper or choice of furniture, but ultimately, we don't need to live their and we can try and appreciate and respect their choice, individuality and freedom in how they view and live there lives. I am under no illusion that this is an easy thing to do, but I believe that by being able to understand that we are stepping into another person's world and being led by their viewpoint and decisions, we can temporarily leave our own judgements and opinions at the door and be very welcome to pick them back up on the way out.

One last thing to say in relation to this, is that one thing we may find, even if we do take this attitude, is that we are actually impacted or changed by hearing other people's views and worlds. Even if we take the attitude of not being threatened by or accepting of another persons approach, when we are listening fully and truly to another person experience, we may hear things that make us reevaluate our own choices or feelings. This can be both life enhancing and also a struggle depending on the impact it may have on us, but I do feel it is an inevitable impact of stepping into another's


experience and allowing it to matter to us.

So, in summary, I believe it is important to be able to offer empathy to others when we feel able and inclined to, not that it is necessarily forced and certainly not disingenuous. I also believe it is important to remember that we do not need to force or change our views in relation to what we do understand about another. Reevaluating our own life or views, may be an impact of listening to others deeply, but most importantly we need to remember to put aside our own views and judgements so that we can fully hear another person's experience and allow them to have it. I think this is a true gift and can really impact our relationships and those around us.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have hoped to give an outline to the attitude of empathy, both in relation to the person-centred approach, but also in the wider world and our interactions with those around us. I believe that empathy is a transformational and hugely powerful relational condition that we can begin to offer to those around us, particularly when there has been so much struggle and emotional turmoil over the last 18 months.

As I mentioned previously in the article, it is also important to hold an attitude of congruence when we are offering empathy to others, so that it is a genuine offering and one that we feel able and capable of offering, at least to some degree, when we do choose to listen in this way.

My final article will look at this attitude of congruence in more detail and how being genuine can be a liberating, but also, at times, challenging way to be in the world. I will explore what being true to ourselves might begin to offer ourselves and those around us within the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. I really do believe that this attitude can be life-changing and is at the heart of most people's journey of self-discover and acceptance. I do believe I may have saved the best attitude until last! 

CONCLUSION

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