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CLINICAL COLUMN

"What Do I Say Next?"

Part Two

"You Gotta Have Empathy!"

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Without empathy, the old cognitively impaired person is alone. In Part One, Sally Walker, CVP (Certified Validation Practitioner) had tried verbal Validation techniques that did not help. Still terrified without her mother, 92 year old Mattie Johnson pushed Sally aside and headed for the door. In a crisis, Validation works only when the worker uses empathy to create a *Validating Moment*: the worker connects *emotionally* with the old person. In this moment, trust happens. Nurtured, bonded, the old person is no longer alone. Without this yeast, Validation techniques often fall flat. What is this thing called empathy? Empathy is a shift from thinking to feeling, from wanting to accomplish something to *being with* someone; being with someone without thinking about it. Empathy is a "moment of shared meaning." (Buber, 1955). Sally said the right words but did not feel the old woman's panic. Sally did not inhale Mattie's need to be with her mother. Afraid that the old woman would escape and get hurt, Sally's intent was to keep Mattie



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(continued)

in the nursing home. Sally's mind raced, trying to remember verbal Validation. What should she say next? Sally had learned Carl Roger's principle of "unconditional positive regard," but did not cross over to Mattie's emotional world. Sally, involved in her thoughts, blocked out Mattie's fears. Mattie, with the intuitive knowing of the Time Confused, sensed that this stranger wanted to thwart her. Mattie yearned to find her family, her familiar house, the things she loved. Moving in past-time, Mattie Johnson rebuffed Sally who did not move with her.

What gets in empathy's way: our own thoughts, motives and fears. Our revulsion and denial of the manifestations of mentally disabled old people can preclude our normal capacity for empathy. Will I be like her when I get old? We scramble to protect ourselves from painful emotions. We expect very old people to act the way they used to act. We want them to conform to our value judgements of socially correct, appropriate, "adult" behavior. Ensnared in our thoughts and feelings, can we, for a moment, enter the reality of an old disoriented person's past time?

How can we learn empathy? First, we need to *want to be* with the old person. Empathy springs to life from a genuine need for fulfillment by creating a heightened awareness of oneself with another. You must be enriched. Second, you must be vulnerable: open to another's emotions; aware of your own value judgements, motives and feelings that lock out the emotions of the old person. Wrapped in her need to keep Mattie in the nursing home, Sally ignored the old woman's need. Third, you must be able to shelve your own emotions, judgements and goals to be open to the emotions of the other. In other words, you must **CENTER**. Sally, gripped by crisis, forgot to Center. With practice, the CVP learns to Center in seconds. (Feil, 1992). Fourth, FOCUS on this human being. Ingest this old person, from top to toe. Nothing else matters. You have no time to think. You are too busy absorbing. Thoughts interfere with spontaneity. You have no intent to change this person. You are open to what happens. "We feel deeply connected...we are at one with the other person...like a blow to the stomach," (Davis, 1990). Empathy takes us unawares.



What Do I Say Next? continued

We are not in control at this moment. Empathy creates something. We experience a jolt: the shift from cognitive mindfulness to deep identification, when the emotions of the old person join ours, and birth a new knowing. "A special alignment occurs." The CVT has crossed over, transcending clock time. Sally's attention strayed. She could not stay in the moment. She worried about the future: "What if Mattie got outside?" Sally's intention was not to observe and absorb, but to manage.

Fifth, return to conscious, cognitive awareness fortified with the bond of empathy. Use verbal and non-verbal Validation. Sally can now touch Mattie, where her mother touched her, gently, on the cheek. In Time-Confusion, Mattie obliterates the painful knowledge that her mother is dead. She has never learned to survive alone, without a loved one. Because she has lost her ability to think logically, Mattie Johnson cannot classify people or things. One person blends with another. Thoughts jumble. Present time is sprinkled with the past. Enveloped in empathy, the old woman responds to the familiar mother's touch. Each cell remembers where it was touched in infancy. Mattie embraces Sally, who

becomes a mother figure. Now, Mattie hears Sally. Now, Verbal Validation works: "It's scary to be alone, without your mother, in a strange place?" Sally asks with empathy. The old woman trusts the young worker. To discard her loneliness, Mattie pours out her longing for her mother and her panic at being abandoned. Her feelings expressed, Mattie is relieved. Arm-in-arm, the two move together towards an activity.

REFERENCES

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3. Davis, C.M. "What is Empathy, and Can Empathy Be Taught?" *Physical Therapist*. 1990:70:707-715.