

## Lesson 21

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### Empathy and Sympathy

When you work with clients who are exploring their feelings about the issues in their life, you are likely to feel some or a lot of what they are feeling. Such feelings may range from sadness, grief, pain, and fear to joy, appreciation, celebration, and ecstasy. If you are emotionally sensitive, you may be drawn into your client's feeling world to a point where you lose your center, clarity, and ability to be an unbiased observer and helper. While compassion and sensitivity are important assets in coaching, if you cross a certain line they will diminish your ability to be helpful to your client, and possibly create disturbing after-effects for you. This lesson will assist you to know how to feel with the client but not dishevel you emotionally.

A good coach can experience and understand the feelings a client is going through without going up and down with the client. To master this dynamic, you must recognize the difference between empathy and sympathy. **Empathy** is the capacity to recognize and honor what the client is feeling and allow him the space to go through his experience. If a client reports a feeling of loneliness, for example, you can understand this experience because you have probably felt lonely at some time in your own life. You can say to the client, *"Yes, I know how it feels to be lonely."* In that moment you demonstrate that you have heard his sharing, validated his experience, and built a bridge of compassion and support. Your client can then consider the message his feeling is delivering, notice any gifts or opportunities in the process, and/or take steps to gain a more fulfilling experience.

When you **sympathize** with the client, on the other hand, you go into her experience so deeply that you take on her feelings as if they were your own. In general this process is not helpful to you as a coach. If you sympathize a lot, you will yo-yo up and down with all of your clients' feelings and probably feel tattered. If you are working with a lot of clients, too much sympathizing is a setup for burnout. While it's important to recognize

and honor your client's feelings, you cannot afford to own them yourself to the point that they distract you from your service.

With practice you can find and develop a balanced position from which you can *compassionately empathize with your client, but not sympathize*. From this perspective you are in the best position to help your client. You understand their pain or situation, but you maintain a more peaceful energy and greater perspective that can help guide them to higher ground. By analogy, if you encountered someone who fell in a hole and could not get out, if you jump into the hole with them, now two people are in the hole. If, however, you remain established on higher ground and extend your arm to your friend, you can help him out and avoid the pitfall yourself. From this position you have leverage.

Your role as coach is to stay anchored in well-being even when your client has momentarily forgotten it. Your consciousness heals more than your words. Remember your client's wholeness, as well as your own, and you will lift him to wholeness.

If you do happen to take on some of your client's feelings, you can do some practices after your session to get back to center. You can symbolically wash your hands; or go outside for a short walk; or sit in the sun for a few minutes. Say a prayer or affirmation of release. Read something uplifting or listen to your favorite music. Feelings are simply energy

(*e-motion = energy in motion*), so as you shift your energy you shift your feelings.

Empathy serves you to connect with your client and uplift him. Sympathy drags you out of your world and into the client's. *Empathy is kind. Sympathy can be debilitating.* Stay loving and stay clear.

### Exercise:

1. With which clients or people in your personal life do you tend to get caught up in their feelings or drama?

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What emotions tend to distract you from your own clarity?

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What has happened to you when you have over-sympathized?

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**2.** Have you had moments with these people when you kept your center and did not get caught up?

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**3.** What did you know, feel, or do in these moments that allowed you to stay anchored in well-being?

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**4.** What positive results did you notice when you kept your center?

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5. What action or practice do you or can you take to release any negative feelings and return to clarity?

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*Affirm:*

**I help my clients by recognizing their feelings and experience  
while maintaining my own peace and clarity.**